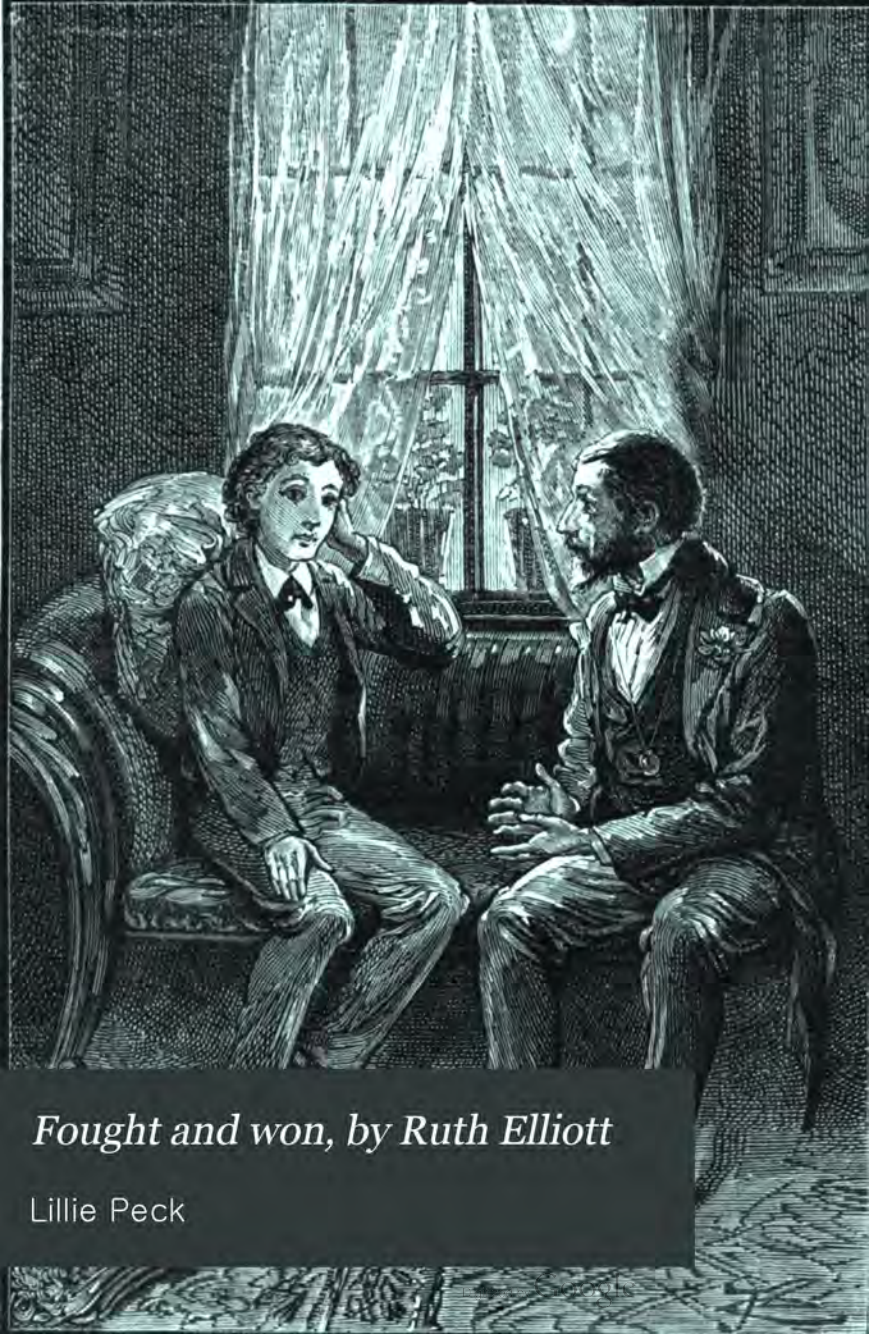

Fought and won, by Ruth Elliott

Lillie Peck

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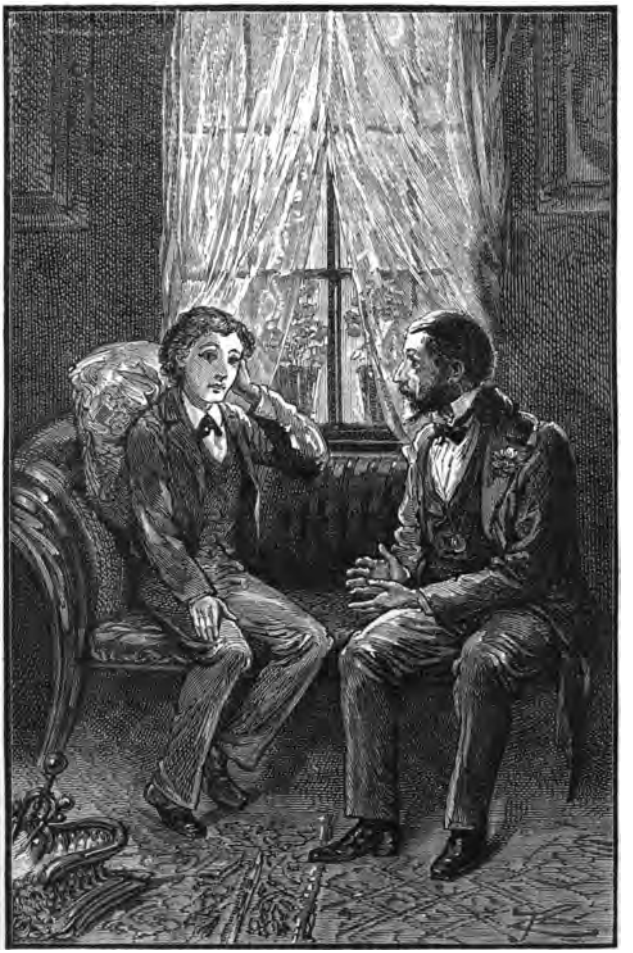

'But my illness was the effect of over-work,' objected Ross.—P. 96.

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FOUGHT AND WON

A Story of Grammar School Life.

BY

RUTH ELLIOTT,

AUTHOR OF

'JOHN LYON,' 'UNDECEIVED,' 'JAMES DARYLL,' ETC. ETC.

LONDON:

PUBLISHED FOR THE PROPRIETOR BY

T. WOOLMER, 2 CASTLE STREET, CITY ROAD, E.C.;

AND 66 PATERNOSTER ROW, E.C.

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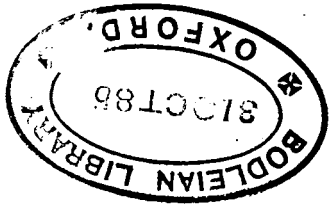

MORRISON AND GIBB, EDINBURGH,
PRINTERS TO HER MAJESTY'S STATIONERY OFFICE.

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CONTENTS.

CHAP.		PAGE
I.	EASTDALE GRAMMAR SCHOOL,	9
II.	MR. HARBOROUGH'S FAVOURITE OCCUPATION,	37
III.	ROSS NORMAN'S LOVE OF DRINK AND SOME OF ITS RESULTS,	66
IV.	DR. BURTON'S ADVICE,	92
V.	ROSS NORMAN DETERMINES TO MAKE UP FOR LOST TIME, AND WIN THE RUTLAND PRIZE, BUT AGAIN TAKES TO DRINK,	119
VI.	'IT IS GOING TO BE THE CURSE OF OUR FAMILY,'	146
VII.	'IT IS DRINK,'	173
VIII.	CECILE'S DYING REQUEST,	199
IX.	'GONE! THE ONE CHERISHED DREAM OF MY LIFE,'	226
X.	THE EASTDALE GRAMMAR SCHOOL TOTAL ABSTINENCE SOCIETY,	249

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FOUGHT AND WON.

CHAPTER I.

EASTDALE GRAMMAR SCHOOL.

THE dinner-bell was ringing furiously at Northland, making noise and clatter enough to deafen ordinary ears, but just suiting the young lady who was pulling the bell-rope. The servant stood by, vainly expostulating, but another terrific burst from the loud-tongued bell sent her flying across the passage with her fingers in her ears.

'Maggie! Maggie! Oh dear! Maggie, be quiet,' said a gentle, quiet-looking woman, with a very distressed look just then on her usually placid features. But she might as well have spoken to the wind. Not a sound did Miss Maggie hear but the music overhead, which was delighting her turbulent, noise-loving young ladyship.

'Stop that row!' shouted an authoritative voice, boyish, but determined, from some of the upper regions. Coming just in a lull, Maggie heard it distinctly, and with a wicked look of mischievous defiance answered by a peal which sent her mother hurriedly back into the dining-room with both hands over her ears.

Flying down-stairs, half a dozen steps at a time, came the owner of the voice, and seeing him Maggie dropped the rope, and, with a shriek something like a wild Indian's war-whoop, dashed across the hall into the dining-room.

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'Leave me alone, Aleck! How dare you? Ah! you thought you had me then, didn't you, sir?' With these and many similar remarks, all tending to aggravate her brother's wrath, the little 'hoyden' dived under the table, sprang over chairs, and couch, and sideboard, eluding every attempt at capture. The entrance of two younger boys, however, made her see the wisdom of capitulation, and from the citadel of her mother's arms she accordingly made terms of surrender.

'I'll let you off this time, if you promise to leave that bell alone,' said Aleck decisively; 'if not, I'll tie you to the bell-rope from now till tea-time.'

'Very well then,' replied reluctant Maggie, reflecting that there were more ways than one of making a noise. 'Go to your own place; I shan't stir till you do.'

'Sit down, my dear boy,' entreated the mother. 'Do let us have a little peace. Maggie, I shall be obliged to send you to school if you are not more subdued and lady-like.'

'Little Tomboy!' said Ross, the second boy, contemptuously.

'Am I? Very well, Master Ross,' said Maggie, with a peculiar lightning flash of her grey eyes. If there were one word in the whole of the English language which she hated, despised, and abominated, it was that one, Tomboy.

Ross laughed, and began his dinner. He was the delicate one in the family,—a pale, slender, refined-looking boy, with soft, dreamy eyes and sensitive lips. Not so handsome as Aleck and John, or Jack, as he was always called, but more attractive to most people. His mother thought him a genius, and with that and his delicacy of constitution he had more than his share of petting. Even at table this was apparent. While the others drank the ordinary table ale, he had his wine glass and bottle of sparkling Burgundy.

'What is the matter, Ross? Don't you feel well, my dear?' asked his mother anxiously, as he leaned back in his chair, and dropped his fork.

'Oh yes; all right. Only that confounded singing in my head,' he replied listlessly.

'No wonder! You may thank Maggie for that treat,' said Jack. 'It's well to be you, Ross. I've a noise in my head too, and this ale makes it worse. It's as flat as ditch-water. Treat us to a bottle of wine, mother.'

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'I would if I could afford it, my dear,' said the yielding mother. 'It is so expensive. Ross must take it for his health. It is really medicine to him.'

'Jolly medicine!' cried Maggie. 'I wish I were delicate! Dr. Daventry did say I wasn't strong.'

'You! Oh, you're a fragile blossom!' said Jack. 'A regular hothouse plant. You ought to be kept under a glass shade. It's your lungs that are affected, I should think, by the way you exercise them.'

'Be quiet, Jack, do,' said Mrs. Norman. She spent a large portion of her time in saying 'Be quiet' to those turbulent children of hers, but with little effect. They were good, loving boys, but so used to her gentle 'don't' and 'do' on all occasions, that they fell now on heedless ears. High-spirited, daring boys, giving her little real trouble, but keeping her in a chronic state of mild expostulation. Maggie was different. To an extremely excitable temperament was united a spirit as fearless and daring as that of either of the boys. Warm-hearted and generous, loving and lovable, she had a stronger hold on her brothers' affection than they were at all aware of, while her mischievous propensities and curiously original methods of maintaining her own personal individuality often roused their wrath and anger. She was what only sisters often are in a family of boys, by turn a pet and a butt. Jack was her special tease; it was his delight to work her up to a state of dancing fury. Maggie always danced when excited. At the same time, it was Jack who was ready at any moment to fight a battle with any one who dared to take Maggie's name in vain. Of Aleck the young lady was a little afraid. He had executed summary vengeance on her for certain mischievous deeds not a few times in her short life, and consequently she held in wholesome awe the right of might. Ross she regarded with a curious mixture of reverence and contempt. He was clever—could actually write poetry by the page! He took off nearly all the prizes at school, and was generally looked upon as the genius of the family. If honour ever fell upon the name of Norman, it would be through Ross. This being an established fact in the eyes of all concerned, she looked up to him as the future bestower of untold fame and glory. At the same time, his indolent, lazy

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habits, and the tinge of selfishness, which was not so much innate as the result of education, brought upon him at times the sting of her imperious little tongue.

Mrs. Norman watched Ross anxiously, every little failure of appetite being noted and duly worried over.

'The Burgundy is flat,' said the boy critically.

'I'll make it fiz,' cried Maggie, seizing the glass as he put it down, the wine almost untasted. 'Give me that crust. Oh, lovely!'

Sparkle and fiz the wine did, as she whirled the piece of bread round in it.

'Now then, Ross, be quick; drink it while it fizzes. You stupid boy! Well, if you won't, I will;' and, suiting the action to the word, the young lady tossed off the wine with evident appreciation, not only of it but of Aleck's condemning look.

'You are a cool hand, Maggie.'

'I always do have half a glass for dinner, and half for supper. Ross lets me; at least he used to, but he likes it too well himself now. The doctor ordered him four glasses a day, and I used to have the fifth. I've only taken my share,' explained Maggie, condescending to the explanation only because she foresaw a charge of selfishness in taking Ross's wine.

'Open another bottle, dear; Aleck and Jack can finish that,' said Mrs. Norman. 'They will not mind if it is rather flat.'

'Oh, jolly!' said Jack. 'Fire away, Aleck. Take your glass away, Maggie. I'm not going to give you any.'

'Mamma, isn't he to give me some?'

'No, indeed,' interposed Aleck; 'little girls should not be so fond of wine.'

'And big boys should,' mimicked Maggie. 'Very well, drink it all up yourselves, you greedy boys.'

It was a half-holiday, and the boys lingered longer than usual at the dinner-table, discussing school affairs. Jack had got into some trouble with the masters, and no one could make out what it was all about.

'They look as black as thunder-clouds every time I meet them,' said injured Jack. 'I've racked my brains to find out

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what I've done. Old Martin gave us a lecture on moral influence in class this morning, and looked at me all the while. I am sure I don't exert an immoral influence. I don't steal or bear false witness, or marry half a dozen wives. That's what I call immoral influence.'

'You do steal,' put in Maggie. 'You stole my best kid gloves, and hid them in the Chinese Mandarin.'

Jack's eyes twinkled wickedly. Maggie had betrayed herself. On the subject of the lost gloves she had hitherto maintained a dignified silence, and Jack had not even known if she had discovered their loss.

'I'll tell you what I should do if I were you,' said Aleck. 'I would go straight to Dr. Winslow and ask him what it all meant. It won't do for you to go on like this, Jack; you will get a bad name in the school. If you have done anything, better have it out and have done with it.'

'Oh, I daresay! it's easy to talk. How would you like to walk into a lion's den and ask him to feel if you were fat enough to be eaten? I'll be bound I've done something, and they've only just found it out. Perhaps they have heard about Hickory.'

'Who's Hickory?' said Maggie.

Ross looked up with a sudden flash of warning, and Jack drew in his breath with a prolonged whistle, and shrugged his shoulders.

'I'll soon find out,' said Maggie coolly.

There was something peculiarly aggravating in her tone, a combination of conscious power with will. The boys were never sure how far she could go, or how much she could do.

'What on earth were you thinking about, Jack?' said Ross, as they left the house together a little later. 'You must be an idiot to mention Hickory before that child! It won't do for her to get on that track. I don't go there myself, but you do, and a lot of the fellows, and it would never do for Maggie to get chattering.'

'How's she to get on the track? I'll engage to send her off if she does. As for Hickory's, it is no worse to go and play there than to play at Longman's, as you do. I never play for money. Here's that Parker tells me to tell you that he wants

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his money, and must have it. I should like to know what you are going to do.'

'I wish Parker would take a trip to the Cannibal Islands!'

'So do I. I'd pack a bottle of sauce in his valise to tempt the appetite of the natives, and help their digestion,' said Jack, the irrepressible.

'It's no joke,' said Ross, with some irritation.

'I wish it were; I'd crack it for you, my boy. But I say, Ross, how are you going to manage?'

Ross made no reply. At the corner of the street a tall, well-dressed boy, with a massive gold chain and pin, and two or three rings showing conspicuously, met them and stopped. An unpleasant-looking boy, with no sign of the gentleman about him.

'I was just coming to Northland,' he said, with scant ceremony. 'I want that little account of mine, Norman, if you can manage it.'

'Certainly. I suppose a day or two will make no difference to you, Parker? I have been rather unlucky of late, one way and another. Money melts.'

'I believe it does. I am rather in a hurry, though, Norman. The fact is, another fellow, one of my tradesmen, is bothering me about his bill, and I don't like to keep that sort of debt standing. So if you can make it convenient to-morrow, or Friday, I shall be glad.'

'I'll make it convenient,' replied Ross indifferently. 'Are you coming down to the river?'

Answering in the negative, the boy ran off. Ross bit his lip, and Jack gave a contemptuous sniff.

'Humbug! Does the fellow think we can't see through his shallow tricks? I should like to know what tradesman is bothering him for money! I do wish you'd send him overboard, Ross.'

'More easily said than done. Shut up about it, Jack. What is the use of belragging a fellow because you happen to owe him money?'

'Oh, very well! just as you like. If he's your style, well and good; he isn't mine!' retorted Jack.

At the river-side a large number of the schoolboys were gathered, waiting for absent members of the various crews.

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The gaily painted boats floated on the shining water, and gave evidence of their owners' care,—trim, neat, and clean.

'Where is Aleck?' shouted one of the boys, as the brothers approached. 'We have been waiting for him this half-hour.'

There was no need for reply. At that moment Aleck came dashing down the road, full speed, never stopping till he sprang into the boat and sank down on the seat.

'Hurrah, boys! pull away!' and away went the boats, cutting through the water like things of life.

Eastdale Grammar School was a noted one. Not only the town boys attended, and boys from the villages near, but many gentlemen sent their sons, in preference to more select private or public schools. The head master, Dr. Winslow, had a boarding-house for the majority of these; the remainder lodged with the under masters. Owing to this arrangement, the school was divided into various cliques, the head master's boys looking on themselves as the *élite*. There was a good deal of caste prejudice, too, throughout the school. The boarders looked down on the ordinary grammar school boys, sons of the town tradesmen, and jealously resented any attempt at intrusion into their circle. The upper-class day-scholars were admitted, sons of professional men or wealthy merchants.

The Normans, by virtue of social position, belonged to the most exclusive set in the school; but, being by no means exclusive themselves, were on friendly terms with all.

Aleck, sensible and reliable, was a great favourite with both masters and boys. He had a name for being always ready in an emergency, and his advice was often asked in matters of difficulty.

Jack, careless, idle too often, good-tempered, and generous to an extreme, was, however, the most popular of the brothers. Everybody liked Jack. Ross was too reserved to be a favourite, though he had many admirers. With his masters he always stood high in favour.

The town boys resented their exclusion from the fastidious upper circle, and, as a natural consequence, there was a standing feud between the two schools,—the town school and resident school.

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'The fellow is quite right,' he said afterwards, when talking it over with some of the boys; 'Gilthorn is not a gentleman, though he does brag about his grand connections. He is a blackguard, and I like Crawford for speaking out. There's something in that fellow, and I mean to look him up. He is worth it, I fancy.'

More than worth it, as Jack found out in after years.

The knowledge that Crawford had refused the friendship of one of the resident school caused him to be regarded with more respect, and when it became known that he was related to the Crawfords of old Carlingford Castle, opposition to his entrance into the exclusive circles gradually died away. School is but a world in miniature.

As time passed, it became apparent that a new clique was forming in the school. At first it was scarcely recognised, but as it increased in numbers, weight, and influence, the alarm was raised. It was too late; the new power was established, and no amount of opposition could shake or disturb it.

It consisted of the best boys in the school, the best in moral force and character. Richard Crawford, of course. For some reason the boys regarded him as the founder, and probably his influence had given the starting impetus. Arthur Winslow, the head master's son, half a dozen more of the upper school, and three or four town boys, these formed the clique. Aleck Norman and Derrick Forbes were among the number. Jack hovered on the brink. Ross kept his own place, and joined no clique.

The nickname of 'Levites' was given by the school, in derision, to this new set. They ridiculed their high sense of honour, which forbade many of the usual school tricks. It was no wonder that enemies arose; there are always plenty to rise against inconvenient morality. The boys found the Levites' code very inconvenient. Even Jack grumbled at times, and pitched into Aleck for carrying things to absurd lengths.

Boating was a favourite amusement with both the upper and lower school, and most of their holidays were spent on

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There had been some discussion and contention when a gentlemanly, clever boy, the son of a Nonconformist minister, had made his appearance at the school. The High Church boys turned up their sarcastic noses, and voted dead against the 'dissenter.' There was such difference of opinion that at last it was decided to let the matter rest till something should happen to turn the scale.

Richard Crawford looked on with calm disdain. Some of the lower school tried to make friends with the new-comer, but met with such a cool reception that they fell back, nonplussed.

There was another outsider in the school, Derrick Forbes, the son of a bank clerk. He was a quiet, studious boy, with intellect far above the average, and of a sensitive, shrinking nature. Why he did not join the town school no one could quite make out. Some put it down to pride, and laughed in derision; others thought that, all his tastes and habits being different, he really felt no pleasure in their society. These were probably near the truth. But Richard Crawford was of a different calibre altogether. His face had a self-possessed, resolute look which took the fancy of more than one in the resident school, and there was an irresistibly attractive atmosphere of strong originality about him which claimed attention. He took at once a high position in the school, and it was soon apparent that he was a brilliant Latin and Greek scholar. It had long been a sore point that Forbes took precedence of most of the resident scholars in nearly all the classes, but that this new-comer should walk over their heads with ease was a bitter pill to swallow.

For some purpose of his own, one of the resident school offered Crawford a sort of *sub rosa* friendship, which was somewhat contemptuously declined. By one of those incomprehensible things—a school leak—the news got out, and was the talk of the whole community. Jack Norman's curiosity was roused, and he seized an early opportunity to walk home with Crawford, with whom he was on speaking terms.

'Gilthorn says you refused his company for a walk the other night,' he said, in the course of conversation; 'he's rather put out. Don't you like him?'

'I am not accustomed to associate with blackguards,' was

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the contemptuous reply. Jack opened his eyes and whistled. Jack's emotions were generally expressed by a whistle.

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Boating was a favourite amusement with both the upper and lower school, and most of their holidays were spent on

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the water. Ross did not belong to either of the boating clubs; his tastes lay in a different direction. His health, too, precluded violent exertion.

After the departure of the boats, he turned from the river, and sauntered slowly up a narrow street which led to the lower part of the town. As he passed a respectable-looking grocer's shop he gave a low clear whistle, but kept steadily on his way without turning his head. At the corner of the street a boy overtook him, and they walked on together. He was a pleasant, frank-looking boy, with a merry, good-natured face, and blue eyes always ready to smile; for eyes can smile as well as lips.

'I want you to do something for me to-night, Frank,' said Norman. 'Will you meet me at the barn?'

'What is it?' was the reply. It sounded cautious, but was no such thing. Frank Harley was always ready to obey Ross Norman's will, for he looked up to him as a sort of superior being, and was proud of even this clandestine friendship. Ross helped him with his Latin and Greek, and had pulled him over many a stiff stile. In return Frank did many little services for Ross which he was too proud to do for himself.

'I am out of cash,' said Ross, in reply to the question; 'I wish I could find a mine!'

'I'd help you to work it. I'm in a like predicament, Norman. I believe my pockets have holes in them;' and Frank turned them inside out, his merry eyes attempting unsuccessfully to look rueful.

'Of course they have, and out of those holes the money goes. The hole at the top, I mean. I don't want to borrow any; I borrow too much. It's the other way.'

'Old Mother Balls?' said Frank. 'All right, I'll do it. What is it this time, and how much am I to get?'

'I don't know what to send yet,' said Ross, with a sigh. 'She has my father's chain, and I want to redeem that. I should never forgive myself if I lost it.'

'Can't you borrow some money? Won't your mother let you have some?'

'She can't. We take every farthing she has to spare as it is. We are not rich, Frank.'

'I know,' said Frank absently. Everybody in Eastdale

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knew that Mrs. Norman could only just make two ends meet, with her limited income and expensive family. 'How much do you want, Norman? I might coax it out of the mother.'

Norman's proud face flushed; he never liked to borrow money, though he had lately done so pretty often. 'I don't want to borrow, I tell you, Frank. It would only be taking one debt instead of another. Parker is in a hurry for his money, and I want to pay him to-morrow. Meet me about eight, and I'll bring something.'

They parted, and Ross went home. He was in no mood for company, and went straight to his own room and locked the door. Each of the boys had his own private room, for Northland was one of those old-fashioned, rambling houses, with plenty of wainscoted rooms, and passages, and winding staircases. The rent of it would have been a welcome addition to Mrs. Norman's small income; but the place was her own, had been her first real home, and she and the boys loved it.

'We will be as economical as we possibly can in other ways,' said practical Aleck. 'Anything, rather than give up Northland.' So they still lived there, in defiance of the advice of many well-meaning friends.

Alone in his own room, Ross unlocked his desk, and took out a small tin box. Opening it, he sat resting his head upon his hand, gazing dreamily at the contents. There were his dead father's diamond and ruby rings, an antique locket set with pearls, and containing that father's portrait; a set of diamond studs, and several things of minor value. He took them up one by one, looking at them with listless eyes. At last he laid the ruby ring on one side, and with impatient hands snapped the key in the lock, and replaced the box in the former place.

Wrapping the ring up in paper, he slipped it in his pocket, and then took out his books, and was soon absorbed. When the tea-bell rang he went down-stairs. Maggie met him in the hall.

'Oh, you are at home, are you? There's company to tea.'

'Who?' he asked, stopping short. 'I shan't come in. Tell mamma I am too busy to come down, will you? there's a good child.'

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'Very well,' said Maggie, with unlooked-for acquiescence. 'They won't mind. Mona has quite enough of boys at home, I expect.'

'Mona! Why didn't you say it was Mona?' said Ross, quickly coming down again; for he was half-way up-stairs.

Maggie laughed mischievously. 'It makes all the difference that it's Mona, doesn't it. I thought you would change your mind.'

A pretty, fair-haired girl was sitting at the open window, holding a skein of silk which Mrs. Norman was winding. A gentle, refined-looking woman, evidently her mother, sat on the couch talking, with a slightly Scotch accent which fell pleasantly on the ear. Ross knew them well; they were Mrs. and Miss Crawford, Richard Crawford's mother and sister. He liked them both—especially the latter.

She held up her hands saucily as he drew near. 'I am glad you have come! I am so tired of holding this! Please take it off and take my place.'

'I don't know how to hold it,' he answered indolently. 'Maggie will take it for you if you are tired.'

Nevertheless his lips relaxed into a smile of great sweetness as he looked down into the violet eyes; and his hands slipped under hers and took the skein. Rarity gives value to smiles, even as to other things; and Ross Norman's smile was very rare.

Mona coloured, and hastily rose to hide her tell-tale face. Many a miniature romance buds, blossoms, and fades away in every town where a large school is found,—some of them harmful; perhaps some of them sweet and fresh and pure—full of life's loveliest promise. In Mona's eyes Ross was a knight, *sans peur et sans reproche;* a chivalrous, almost faultless hero. In Ross's eyes Mona was the ideal of a perfect girlhood.

Dr. Winslow encouraged his boys to seek the society of ladies. He held that there was no influence so strong for good, so refining and purifying, as that of a cultured, pure-minded girl. Of the ordinary run of girls, the fast, flippant little hoydens, who imitated their brothers' habits and slang, he had a horror. His own daughters were sweet little English girls, with simple, unaffected manners, and shy brown eyes; gentle as young fawns, and as graceful. Not a schoolboy

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but felt proud if the Doctor's little daughters honoured him with a smile, or stopped to speak to him in the grounds. Mona Crawford was their chief friend, and the three, with Clarice and Cecile Harborough, the banker's daughters, formed a set or clique more exclusive than any in Eastdale. What the Levites were to the boys, they were to the girls. Once every month Dr. Winslow gave a soirée, to which only such boys were invited whose characters stood the closest scrutiny. To be invited to these soirées was equivalent to a certificate of honour. Grace and Dora exercised their own discretion as to the girls. They were to be trusted; for more fastidious young ladies in all matters of manners and morals it would have been difficult to find.

'Richard tells me that Jack is in disgrace. What is it about?' asked Mona.

She spoke out at the tea-table, knowing it to be the habit of the Norman boys to discuss all school topics before their mother. There was no fear of telling secrets.

'No one knows; at least none of us.'

'Jack won't be asked to the next soirée,' put in Miss Maggie. 'Won't he be angry?'

Ross looked annoyed and a trifle angry.

'I wish you would learn to mind your own business, Maggie. Don't go spreading that report.'

'I'm not going to; and it is my own business—he's my brother.

'It surely is not so serious as to keep him from the soirée?' said Mrs. Norman anxiously. 'I do hope he has done nothing really wrong.'

'Not he, mamma; don't you worry. I should like to cut a piece off Maggie's tongue.'

Mrs. Norman was easily satisfied. If Ross said it was all right, it must be so; she never doubted his word. Mona was not so soon quieted. She said nothing at the time, but after tea she waited in the garden for Ross to join her, as she knew he would.

'Ross, doesn't Jack know what it is all about?'

'He says not. Why, are you frightened about the soirée?'

'I should be so vexed if he were not asked. It would be

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such a disgrace. But what a strange thing not to know! Why doesn't he ask?'

'That is what Aleck was advising. I should if I were in his place. Arthur Winslow could tell him, perhaps.'

'No; Richard asked him. He knows nothing; and if he did he would not tell—if his father told him, I mean.'

'When is the soirée, Mona?'

'Thursday week. I believe you are frightened, Ross.'

'No; but it would be no joke,' he replied absently. 'Why are you in such a hurry to go?'

'Mamma has her servants' class to-night; they come early this week. There is Jack.'

'Don't say anything about the soirée,' said Ross hurriedly.

Mona looked astonished, and a little hurt—as if she were likely to say anything!

Jack was in high spirits; their crew had excelled themselves, and they felt pretty sure of victory in the coming race. Aleck had gone home with James.

Ross drew a breath of relief. He went to the gate with Mona, while Jack went in to his tea.

'You don't look very well, Ross,' said gentle Mrs. Crawford. 'I am afraid you are working too hard. Do not give too much even for the Latin prize.'

'It is worth a great deal, Mrs. Crawford.'

'Not worth your health, dear,' said his mother. 'Are you going to work again to-night?'

'Only for a little while. I shall go out presently.'

He stood at the gate till the Crawfords were out of sight; then went in.

'What are you going to do, Jack?—about this row, I mean.'

'Oh, bother! Let it go. I shan't ask. It will blow over,' said careless Jack, making a raid on a cold rabbit pie. 'What are you going to do about Parker, I should like to know?'

'Pay him,' said Ross coolly.

'How—when—where?'

'Make a debt to pay a debt. I've got the money.'

Jack looked relieved. 'It's been bothering me all the afternoon. I hate a Norman being in debt to such a fellow as Parker.'

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Ross strolled up to his room, but did not touch a book. Whatever his thoughts were about, they were unpleasant ones, to judge by his face. As it drew near eight he ran down a back staircase and out at a side door. There was a gate leading from the orchard into a lane which was little frequented. At the top of the lane an old barn stood under a cluster of trees; it had no door, and the roof was half off, but it was a good place for its present purpose. He sat down on a broken beam, and waited impatiently. It was half-past eight before Frank came.

'I could not help it,' he exclaimed, breathless with running. 'Some of the fellows came about a supper at Cairngill Force, and I couldn't get away.'

'It doesn't matter. You can't go till after dark. How much will she give me on this, Frank? It is a splendid ruby.'

Frank took the ring, and held it up to the light. 'It is a beauty! Is it real?'

'It was my father's,' said Ross coldly.

'Well, I'll get as much as I can,' said Frank, pocketing it. 'I say, Norman, will you come to the Force with us? There will only be Patrick, and Aubrey, and Price, and myself. Do come; it will be so jolly! Supper by moonlight, and so on.'

Ross wavered; he saw plainly that he was expected to go as some return for Frank's services, but he did not like the set. They were upper schoolboys, and not really bad ones. Indeed, Aubrey had once been invited to one of the Doctor's soirées, and Price was expecting to be. Still they were not his sort, and he did not care to mix with them. Seeing his hesitation, Frank pressed it.

'No one will know anything about it but ourselves. It is Aubrey's supper; he has had a huge hamper from London. I told him I'd try to get you to come, and he left it to me. I'm the only lower boy, you see. Aubrey's cousin's been married, and they have sent him a lot of the wedding breakfast things, and half a dozen bottles of wine. He is a good fellow, and it will be awfully jolly. Don't be so particular, Norman; you'll like it as well as any of us. You might come, if only to oblige me.'

'Very well,' was the reluctant reply; 'I'll come.' And

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then Ross went home, and Frank turned his steps toward a pawn-shop, kept by an unscrupulous old man and his wife, who had had many unlawful dealings with the grammar school boys. Old Mother Balls was the name given to the woman by the boys, who cordially hated her, but could not do without her. How she had evaded detection so long was a mystery, but they kept their secret well, and she, of course, kept hers.

A small packet passed from Frank to Ross the next morning, and shortly after the latter sauntered carelessly up to Parker.

'I'll pay that little debt of mine, Parker.'

'Thank you; I shall be glad.'

The money changed hands, and with a smile on his face, and a bitter pain in his heart, Ross turned away; Parker gazed after him with a curious look in his shifting eyes.

'I should like to know where he got it,' he thought; 'not with his right hand, I'll be bound.'

It was a saying among the boys, that a thing fairly come by was got by the right hand, and *vice versa.*

At the appointed time Ross was at the rendezvous, and found all the boys assembled. He was eagerly welcomed, for it was no small thing to have the genius of the school with them. Aubrey, an open-faced, merry boy, danced a jig on the top of the gate-post in honour of his arrival.

'What are you waiting for?' asked Ross, as they still stood waiting, and looking down the road.

'I asked Parker to join us, and he promised to come. Here he is, late as usual.'

Ross coloured with annoyance, but did not speak. Parker came up, and they started for the Force.

It was a beautiful night, warm and clear. Full of life and spirit, the boys made the night merry with jokes and laughter. Only Ross was silent. Intensely annoyed at finding himself in Parker's hated company, he could not join in their careless mirth, which only grated discordantly on his ear. As if conscious of this, as he undoubtedly was, Parker persistently addressed him, forcing him to answer. He was glad when they reached the Force, when unpacking the supper baskets diverted Parker's attention.

'I'm awfully sorry, Norman,' whispered Frank, as he

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stooped to pick up the corkscrew. 'I had no idea Aubrey was going to ask Parker; but don't let it spoil all the fun.'

If it had not been for that obnoxious presence Ross would have enjoyed the novel picnic. There were an abundance of wedding breakfast dainties, and plenty of good wine, of which, young as he was, he was somewhat a judge. No one liked a glass of good wine better than he, but it was not often the chance of tasting one fell to his lot. Aubrey was a generous host, and kept his guests well supplied.

No one seemed to notice Norman's abstraction; schoolboy jokes, most of them rather pointless, and schoolboy tales, not very witty, made up what passed for conversation. Parker's remarks were frequently worse than pointless or witless. At one of his choice stories, at which the rest laughed loudly, Norman's lips curled involuntarily.

'What are you sneering at?' asked Parker, bending forward, and speaking with cool insolence. 'Is the conversation too highly flavoured for your refined taste?'

There was more in the tone than the words. The boys paused, and waited for the reply.

'My taste must learn to accommodate itself to its company.'

With an oath Parker sprang to his feet. 'Do you dare to insinuate that the present company is not good enough for you and your'—

'Shut up!' interposed Aubrey, clapping a pigeon's wing into the boy's polluted mouth—polluted by words too coarse and profane for repetition. 'I'm not going to have my supper-party spoilt by a row! Take some wine! have a biscuit! let me give you some more pie! try that tongue! have a slice of cake! only shut up!'

With a face as black as night Parker sat down and resumed his supper. Ross could eat no more; he drank instead.

'This isn't like the stuff you bring us from your shop, Frank,' cried Aubrey admiringly, too candid and unconventional to be above sounding the praises of his own wine. 'This is something like wine! I could not drink much of it, though.'

'Why not?' demanded Parker superciliously.

'I never can drink much wine, it gets into my head so soon. It's a confounded shame!'

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'You could drink more of this than you could of Frank Harley's stuff.'

'Oh, come,' said good-natured Frank, 'don't abuse my wine. You are glad enough to get it, at any rate; especially at our price. It's just as good as you would get at the King's Arms, and shillings cheaper! You don't know where our wine goes.'

'Children's parties! gooseberry wine for good little boys and girls.'

'Not such little boys either,' was the significant reply. 'Old Green had a lot for his party the other night.'

'And you were there, Parker!' cried Price. 'That's good! Gooseberry wine for little boys! Hurrah! a joke for the school!'

'No, no!' said Frank. 'It won't do; keep it quiet, or I shall get into trouble.'

'All right! Don't give that little boy any more wine, Pat, he isn't used to it. Pass the gooseberry.'

Parker reddened angrily. Like most boys of his class, he hated being laughed at, and was famous for being unable to take a joke. He had already taken more wine than was good for him, and jokes began to look like insults. Aubrey prudently interfered, and, by popping the cork of a champagne bottle at Price's head, effected a timely diversion.

Clearing away the remainder of the eatables, he produced a pack of cards, which gave a new current to Norman's thoughts.

'You'll play, Norman?' inquired Aubrey.

'I think not; no, thank you.'

'Had enough of it last time?'

It was Parker who spoke, with a perceptible sneer. Ross had already drank till his usually cool brain was heated and confused, and the tone irritated him almost beyond endurance. Parker was the son of a rich coal merchant; a man who had risen from a humble position, and who hoped by the power of money to place his son within the magic circle of Eastdale *élite*. The boy was always supplied with this supposed all-powerful auxiliary, and by means of it he certainly did win his way among the majority of the upper schoolboys. He gave good parties, and was a convenient money-lender, not exacting too much interest. Some of the school despised and

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disliked him. Arthur Winslow and Aleck Norman refused his acquaintance altogether. Ross had met him several times at supper-parties, and unfortunately had lost money by him at cards. After paying him that morning, he had mentally resolved never to play in his company again. Alas for good resolutions! Urged by Aubrey, who would take no refusal, goaded by Parker's unconcealed sneer, he took his place and joined the players. The stakes were not high, that is, simply as stakes; as schoolboy losses and gains they were not small.

Finding himself losing again and again, Ross grew white with excitement and a gnawing pain at his heart. Several times he refused to play again, but Aubrey, who was winning, took such an injured tone, and grumbled audibly at having his 'wedding breakfast' spoilt, that he yielded and went on to his fate. If Parker had not been there he could have refused and adhered to his refusal; if his brain had been cool and collected he would have done so despite the hated presence. As it was, he scarcely realized what he was doing, and when at last they rose from the rocks which had served for table and seat, he was deeper in debt than he had ever been in his life.

Little did Doctor Winslow suspect that the boys—of whom, if he thought at all, it was that they were fast asleep in their dormitory—were gambling hard and fast in the quiet, rebuking moonlight, and some of them making the night hideous with language foul and profane!

On the way home a quarrel arose between Parker and Frank. The former tried to make Frank carry his greatcoat, which, always careful of his valuable health, he had taken to serve as a cushion on the rocks. Frank naturally declined, and high words passed between them.

'You ought to think yourself honoured by being allowed to enter the company of gentlemen, you young sugar-cane! I wonder Aubrey condescends to ask a shop-boy to his parties!' cried Parker at last, too much intoxicated to calculate the effect of his words. They had all drunk too much, and Frank's blood was always somewhat hot. He flew out at the insulting words, and gave Parker a blow that felled him to the ground. He was up again in a moment, mad with anger,

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and would have fought Frank there and then had the others not interposed.

'You ought to be ashamed of yourself!' cried Aubrey hotly. 'What if his father does keep a shop? it's as good as a coal cellar!'

Parker turned white with rage; but there were five to one, and he deemed discretion the better part of valour. So, contenting himself with a muttered series of imprecations, he started off by himself, and left them to follow at their leisure. Leaving the boarders at the school boundaries, Ross and Frank pursued their way home in silence. Both of them were depressed, and out of spirits.

'It's a shame to throw that in a fellow's teeth!' said Frank suddenly. 'I hate that Parker! conceited upstart! Who is he, I'd like to know?'

'I shouldn't bother about it if I were you,' said Ross moodily. 'He isn't worth it. You'll have to go to Mother Balls again, Frank.'

'I know I shall—for myself!' groaned Frank. 'My father declares he won't give me another penny this half, and mother hasn't any to spare, I know. I'm in for it, pretty deeply this time! It was that confounded wine getting into a fellow's head and making an idiot of him. I shall have to pay for this to-morrow; shan't I have a beautiful headache! and I haven't a single lesson ready.'

Sick at heart, Ross wished him 'good-morning,' for it was nearly three o'clock, and turned toward his own home. As he skirted the side lawn he glanced up at his mother's window, and with a rush of remorse wondered how she would feel if she knew that her favourite son was creeping like a thief into the house in the grey dawn, with a fevered brain, and trembling hand, and sullied conscience. It was not a pleasant thought, and he hastened to dismiss it. Unlocking the little side door, he crept up-stairs, and was soon safe in his own room. He threw himself on the bed, but could not sleep. His thoughts kept him awake. It was a relief when the servant knocked at his door and told him it was time to get up.

At the breakfast-table Mrs. Norman's quick eye noted her boy's haggard face with anxious love.

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'I am sure you are not well, Ross! My dear boy, what is the matter?'

'You do look seedy!' cried out-spoken Jack. 'One would think you had been out on the spree last night.'

'I'm all right. It's only my head.'

'Let me send a note to Dr. Winslow; do. You must not overwork yourself. Stay at home and rest, my dear boy. It won't endanger your chance of the prizes.'

'I shall be better at school. Maggie would drive me wild if I stayed at home.'

'No, I wouldn't. I should like to know who that was walking about the house ever so early,' said Maggie, with a defiant toss of her wilful little head and a significant glance at Ross.

'Rats,' said Jack. 'There are ever so many of them in this house. I believe they were nibbling at your door, Maggie; I heard a noise.'

Ross mentally blessed Jack; which, however, was more than Miss Maggie did. Rats were her great terror, her abhorrence. Her horror and fear at the sight of one amounted to frenzy. It was a constitutional weakness, a physical idiosyncrasy, the doctor said, and not to be controlled beyond a certain point. The mention of them diverted her thoughts, and Ross was left in peace.

On the way home from school that morning Frank overtook him, and gave his elbow a significant nudge. Frank Harley was a privileged member of the lower school. Good-natured, and utterly without pretension or self-assertion, the upper school both liked and found him useful. It was he who ran their errands, bought their wine and cigars, and did sundry other more delicate little pieces of business for them. In return for this they invited him to their picnics and parties. It was no uncommon thing for a number of the boarders to hire a waggonette on a half-holiday, and start off for a picnic at some distant tarn, or force, as the waterfalls are called in the North,—force or foss. Dr. Winslow had hitherto made no objection to these excursions; he had had no occasion to to do so. Sometimes he joined them himself, and this the better disposed boys regarded as high honour. Such as Gilthorn, Patrick, and even Aubrey at times, were inclined to give vent to a few expletives more forcible than elegant.

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'I say,' whispered Frank, leaning over the bridge and pretending to be absorbed in watching the minnows, 'have you seen Aubrey or Price this morning? Have you heard?'

'Heard what?'

'About last night, or rather this morning. Dalglish caught sight of Price disappearing through the dormitory window. He didn't recognise him, but he's been asking them all round, and they've had to deny it. Nice, isn't it?'

Schoolboy honour is a queer thing. To disobey the head master, and break one of the strictest rules of the school, was a lark; to tell a lie was dishonourable and a disgrace. Of course this was not the view taken by all the boys. The lie was as simple a part of the programme to Gilthorn or Patrick as breaking the rules; while to such as the Levites both were alike dishonourable and discreditable.

'Aubrey is in such a rage! I can't think what Dalglish wanted to be stuck up at his window for at that unearthly hour. Why wasn't he in bed and asleep like a Christian? Have you heard about the soirée?'

No; Ross had heard nothing. He had avoided everybody, and buried himself in his books.

'Little Ted Winslow told some of them, and it's all over the school. It mayn't be true, though. The Doctor is going to do it in style this time. It is to be a grand picnic. All the swells in the neighbourhood are asked, or going to be. Carriages, wagonettes, phaetons, donkey chairs, and so on—a regular procession! Aubrey's wild. And as for Price, he's ready to fight anybody and everybody. He says last night has done for him; though how he makes it out I don't know. You'll be asked, of course; you always are.'

'Unless last night does for me too,' was the bitter reply.

'Stuff! how should it? No one will know you were there; and if they did, you were breaking no rule. They can't touch us day boys.'

True enough; yet Ross went home in no enviable state of mind. On the way he met Grace and Dora Winslow, driving their cream-coloured ponies, which were the admiration of the whole neighbourhood. Mona Crawford was with them. He

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raised his cap with an easy grace, and they bowed and smiled as they always did to Ross Norman.

'Papa says Ross is sure of the Latin prize; his verses are splendid,' said Dora. 'Papa was talking last night of making him write some English verses and read them aloud at the distribution. I wish he would; his poetry is beautiful. What makes him look so down, I wonder?'

Mona was wondering the same thing. 'I should like to know what Jack has been doing,' she said absently, remembering their conversation on the subject.

'So should I. Papa never tells us anything about the boys' scrapes. Even Arthur does not know; I wish Jack would not go with the Dangerfields so much; they are not nice boys, and I am sure they do him harm.'

'There is no real harm in Jack,' said Mona hastily. 'He does things without thinking. Why don't you tell him the Dangerfields are not nice? He would listen to you, Dora; Jack is so easily led.'

Dora shook her pretty head and looked frightened at the very idea. Mona laughed.

'Well, I shall tell him what I think about them. Mamma says that we have a great responsibility resting on us, and I believe it is true. The boys all think a great deal of what we say and do, and I am sure we have an influence over them. It is not conceited to say so, so don't look like that, Grace. It is far better to acknowledge the truth, and try and make our influence as strong for good as possible. That is what mamma says.'

A wise mother was Mrs. Crawford. On coming to live at Eastdale two courses had been open to her: either to keep her attractive, winning little daughter away from the grammar school boys as much as possible, prohibiting all childish friendships with them; or to allow her to mix with them as freely as occasion offered, and fence her round from harm by giving her the highest ideal of friendship, and influence, and of the power for good possessed and exercised by every true and noble nature. She had chosen the latter, and results had fulfilled her expectations. Possessed of a certain quiet, childish dignity, combined with a quick perception of character, Mona took exactly the position her mother desired.

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The bad boys disliked her, the untrustworthy, shifting ones shunned her, while the higher class, the true, good, gentlemanly boys, of whom the school had its share, liked her cordially, and were proud of her friendship. Dr. Winslow pursued a similar course with his motherless girls; and the clique of sweet-tempered, pure-minded, cultivated little girls was like a leaven of refining influence in the school.

On the other hand, mingling with such boys as Aleck, Ross, Jack, Arthur, and others of like character, the girls learned to throw off many of the little faults and foibles to which girlhood more than boyhood is prone. There was advantage on both sides; each did the other good.

The invitations to the picnic came at dinner-time. The servant brought them in. One for Aleck, one for Ross. They tore them open, and Aleck read his aloud.

'The soirée!' shrieked Maggie; 'and Jack isn't invited! I told you so! I told you so!'

Everybody looked up, and Jack sat in a state of blank stupefaction.

'It must be a mistake,' said Mrs. Norman, wholly unable to realize that it could be a fact. 'The postman has dropped it. Jane, did you clear the box, are you sure?'

Maggie was off her seat in a moment, and in the hall, opening and shutting the door of the letter-box with a clatter and bang. There was no letter there.

'Dr. Winslow must have forgotten it; it is all a mistake; I am sure it is a mistake!' reiterated Mrs. Norman, as much dismayed as her boys. 'You must tell him, Jack. No, you must, Aleck; it will come better from you.'

'It's no mistake,' groaned Jack; 'it's right enough as far as that goes. He's left me out on purpose.'

'What for?' said Maggie. 'What is it you've been doing?'

'Oh, Jack, my dear boy, have you been doing anything wrong?' said his mother anxiously, but disbelievingly. 'Why do you say it is done on purpose?'

'Oh, I know it is. I knew there was something in the wind; I don't care a button for the picnic, it's the disgrace.'

The boy's lip trembled, and he gulped down his ale. Maggie broke into a storm of wrathful indignation.

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'I will go and ask Dr. Winslow how he dares to leave you out! I will! Be quiet and leave me alone, Ross! He shan't disgrace Jack!'

'Oh, do sit down and shut up, Maggie,' said poor Jack crossly. 'Just as if Dr. Winslow didn't know what he was about!'

'Well, Jack,' said Aleck's clear, decisive voice, 'I think it's quite time some one did speak to Dr. Winslow. If you don't like to do it, I will see him and have it out. If there is any mistake it ought to be put right for the sake of all of us. This must not go on, for it is a disgrace.'

'Of course it is. Everybody will want to know why I am not there.'

'What are we to tell them?' asked Ross.

'I don't know. Somebody's been raking up some old tale or other. It's a confounded shame to hit a fellow in the dark.'

Aleck looked straight into the honest, indignant eyes, and Jack slightly coloured.

'I did get into a bit of a scrape weeks ago, but it was not enough for all this, Aleck. I was only down at'— He pulled up sharply, and glanced at Ross.

'Where?' asked Mrs. Norman.

'Only a place where some of us meet, down the river, mamma. Not a nice place, and I have only been once or twice,' was the candid reply. 'I know Dr. Winslow would be awfully angry if he knew, but it isn't as if I went often. I don't believe that is it at all. I suppose it is, though, for there's nothing else.'

'I shall speak to him, Jack,' said Aleck, as he rose from the table. 'I will go at once and see him before school. Make your mind easy, old boy.'

He snatched his cap from the stand and darted off. Later on Ross followed slowly. His head ached, and he felt ill and depressed. What if the Doctor found out about sundry little transactions, or heard of the last night's events? A cold chill ran through him at the bare thought. Jack overtook him in a few minutes; he, too, seemed in no hurry to get to school.

'I wish Hickory were at the bottom of the sea,' he began. 'I was a donkey ever to go. How on earth it has got out I

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can't imagine. Aubrey and Price were there too, so I suppose they are in for it. Price quite expected to be asked to this soirée, or picnic, as it has turned out. It's a sell for him.'

'Yes,' said Ross absently.

'That's a lot of sympathy to give a fellow! I say, Ross, wake up! you are half asleep.'

'I was thinking about a Norman, not a Price.'

'Now, Ross, don't you go and bother about me. It is a precious good thing it is me, and not you. Oh, bother the grammar!'

'Why is it a good thing?'

'Better for me to bring the disgrace than for you—our genius! Why, mamma would break her heart if you came to grief.'

The words rang in Ross Norman's ears long after. As they entered the playground Aleck came out of Dr. Winslow's garden by the little private gate. He looked grave and vexed, but nodded cheerfully to Jack.

'Wait here a minute, Jack. It's all right—so far.'

'So far!' echoed Jack, seating himself on the low wall and swinging his feet. 'How much further is it to go on, I wonder?'

Aleck was back in a couple of minutes, breathless with running.

'Dr. Winslow asked me to give a message to Mr. Martin. Well, I asked right out why you were left out, Jack, and we had a long talk. He wishes you had gone to him yourself, and so do I.'

'All right! go ahead. What have I been doing?' interrupted Jack ungraciously.

'He said that he had noticed you had not been so steady lately, that your lessons were not up to the mark, and your general conduct less satisfactory. That made him anxious and watchful. And then, Jack, by some means—he did not say what—he found out that you had been in worse than questionable places, engaged in worse than questionable pursuits. That was Hickory, of course.'

'What did you say?'

'I told him just what you told me: that you had gone once or twice,—I did not say where; we took it for granted

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we were speaking of the same place,—and that it was weeks ago, and you did not intend to go again. Eh, Jack?'

'Oh, well, if you've promised for me, I can't very well help myself!' said Jack, with a shrug.

'I said it was not a favourite or usual resort of yours. He looked rather surprised when I said you had not been for weeks, and he said he was afraid your memory was not good.'

'It is, though!' cried Jack hotly. 'Does he think I would condescend to tell a lie about it? It's three weeks ago.'

'Well, he has heard otherwise. Look here, Jack, don't go there any more, there's a good fellow. It will get you into some awful scrape, as sure as your name is Jack Norman. What *do* you go for?'

'Well, you see, Hickory has a jolly billiard-room, and Aubrey offered to teach me how to play. Every fellow knows how to play billiards now-a-days. And then we had some wine—not much, at least I didn't. Gilthorn drank himself quarrelsome; he always does.'

'Gilthorn! you don't mean to say you were with him! *That fellow!*' cried Aleck, with unutterable contempt. 'The biggest blackguard in the school! Now I know what the Doctor meant when he talked about demoralizing company.'

'He is a blackguard,' avowed Jack. 'I didn't go with him, you may be sure. But the worst of Hickory's is, you don't know who'll be there. He came in after, and would play. There was a row, and just in the middle of it some fellow opened the door and looked in. Don't know who he was; never saw him before; but he must have told the Doctor. Mean scamp!'

'Anyhow you won't go again, will you?' urged Aleck earnestly, but kindly. 'I hate to have your name associated with Gilthorn and his set; that's a disgrace in itself. I wish Dr. Winslow would find out all about Hickory and put a stop to it.'

'If he did the fellows would soon find another place. You see it's convenient; out of the way of the town, and the billiard-room is in the back yard, where it is safe from passers-by.'

'Jack,' said Aleck, lowering his voice, 'I heard a whisper

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the other day about some of the fellows; it is said that they don't stop at billiards and beer, but that wine and gambling are not unknown. Is it true?'

Jack coloured, and twisted round on his uncomfortable seat. 'I never gamble, Aleck. Some of them do—horribly! I have had a couple of glasses of wine there; there is no harm in that. Some of the fellows go in for it pretty strong. As for cards, I hate 'em.'

'Gambling and drinking!' said Aleck, with a curl of his handsome lip. 'Look here, Jack, you know the old proverb about pitch; don't you touch it.'

'Seems to me I've done it already to some purpose. What did the Doctor say about the picnic?'

'Only that he hoped you would take a wordless warning and regain your old position before the next soirée. He spoke kindly, Jack.'

The school bell put a stop to the conversation, and the boys hastened to take their places.

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CHAPTER II.

MR. HARBOROUGH'S FAVOURITE OCCUPATION.

THOUGH he said little about it, Jack felt the disgrace keenly. It was the first time that a Norman had been omitted from any of the Doctor's gatherings, and to a proud, sensitive nature the quiet disapproval evinced by the non-invitation was sufficiently galling.

Neither Aubrey nor Price were invited, and the latter chose to consider himself injured. He had been making considerable efforts to obtain the coveted distinction, but had thought it necessary only to clean the outside of the platter. Dr. Winslow thought otherwise.

Aubrey took his disappointment calmly, and after school hours disappeared from view. Where he went no one knew. The next Monday morning a caricature of the picnic procession was posted on the schoolroom wall, behind the Doctor's chair. It commenced with a spirited sketch of the band car of Wombwell's menagerie; following this were vehicles of all shapes and fashions, from a large highly-decorated family coach of the last century to a heavy bath-chair, drawn by a decrepit old man, whose face bore a suspicious resemblance to Dr. Winslow's.

There was much tittering among the younger boys as the Doctor took his seat. Following the general gaze, he turned and looked up. Those nearest declared that the corners of his mouth quivered in a peculiar fashion, indicative of amusement rather than wrath. But when he resumed his seat his face was impenetrable.

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Requesting one of the boys to remove this masterpiece of schoolboy genius, he proceeded to read prayers. Aubrey sat looking on with an expression of astonished wonderment in his twinkling eyes.

'Who in the world did that?' he whispered to his neighbour. 'What a cheeky thing to do! Won't he catch it!'

'I rather think he will,' was the reassuring answer. Aubrey subsided into silence.

After prayers the Doctor rose, holding the paper, which had been placed on his desk, in his hand. The boys sat perfectly still, though he had given no sign for silence. His face was sign enough.

'I shall be obliged if the performer of this creditable piece of work will come forward and claim his property,' he said quietly.

No one stirred. Then there was a general move as the boys turned to look for a guilty face. Aubrey's inquisitive eyes roved everywhere, and finally settled on Ross Norman. The Doctor waited a few minutes, scanning the faces before him with their different expressions. What he read he kept to himself.

'Again, I *request* the perpetrator of this questionable joke —I presume it is intended for a joke—to come forward.' There was an unmistakable emphasis on the *request*, which left little doubt as to its real meaning. Still no one moved.

'I regret to find that there is a boy in this school who is ashamed of his own work. Arthur, do you know anything of this?'

It was always the Doctor's custom to commence any inquiry of this sort with his own son. Arthur's rather contemptuous 'No' was distinctly audible.

Aleck, Crawford, and Forbes followed. Ross came next. The Doctor did not repeat the question to each, but merely looked at them, or spoke their names. He looked at Ross, but, to the surprise of nearly the whole school, there was no reply.

'Norman?'

'Yes, sir.'

'You do know something of this?' demanded the Doctor, evidently as much surprised as any one.

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'I do, sir.'

'May I ask how far your knowledge extends?'

'I know whose work it is; I know no more.'

The Doctor gazed at him searchingly, not doubtingly, but did not immediately speak. The school looked on in blank astonishment.

'Very well. Once more I request the owner of this to come forward. I shall not pursue the inquiry as I intended to do. I leave it to the honour of the boy to declare himself.'

Still no one moved. After waiting a few minutes, the Doctor laid the paper down, and walked into the class-room.

'Who did it?' was the question of that day. The boys congregated in groups after school, talking it over and hazarding guesses, Aubrey loudest of all.

'I say, Ross, what on earth do you know about this affair?' cried Crawford; 'you of all fellows in the school!'

'I know nothing by choice, you may be sure.'

'Who was it, Norman?' asked Aubrey. 'Was it Jack? You wouldn't keep it so quiet if it were not one of yourselves.'

'Better ask if I did it myself,' said Ross coldly.

'Well, perhaps you did. Why don't you 'fess?'

'I would if I had done it. It's the sort of thing that makes a fellow feel small till it is got rid of,' was the somewhat significant reply.

'Did Jack really do it?' said little Ted Winslow eagerly. They had not noticed his small inquisitive face.

'Little stupid! of course not!' cried Aubrey, alarmed.

Nevertheless, Master Ted carried the news to his father that Jack Norman had done the deed, and Ross was screening him.

Mona Crawford was at the dining-room window as the boys passed on their way home. She signed Jack to stop, and he went in.

'Send Maggie down to tea this evening, Jack, will you? Mamma and papa are going out, and I've promised to have Maggie a long time. Tell her we will have tea in the garden.'

'May I come too?' asked Jack, then stopped and coloured. 'You've heard, of course, Mona?'

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'About the picnic? I am so sorry, Jack. It will spoil the picnic for us all.'

'No, it won't. What's it going to do that for?' was the irate reply. 'It's quite bad enough without that. It's a confounded shame!'

'It's a great pity. I don't know what it is about, Jack. Richard won't tell me if he knows. Why don't you ask Dr. Winslow, and have it all out?'

'Aleck has asked him. It's that old Hickory. Fancy making all this fuss about a game of billiards and a glass or two of wine!'

'Is that it? Who is Hickory?'

'A fellow down by the river. You don't know him. I say, Mona, don't mention him, will you?'

'Certainly not. But, Jack, you don't go there, do you?' said Mona anxiously.

'I have been. Blest if I go again!' grumbled Jack, feeling it a relief to talk it over with Mona, who was full of sympathy. 'It's horrid to hear the fellows all asking a thousand questions, and worrying one out of one's life to tell them how, when, and where. I'm not asked to the picnic, and that's enough.'

'Jack,' said Mona gently, after he had let off some of the pent-up steam of mortification and shame, 'you won't mind what I say, will you?—I mean, you won't be offended? But I do wish you would not go with those Dangerfields. I am sure they will do you harm.'

'What's the matter with them?' was the ungracious reply.

'They are not good boys,' said Mona, colouring, for the position of Mentor was not a congenial one. 'They are not like Aleck, and Ross, and Arthur.'

'And Jack? Oh, never mind leaving me out,' said poor Jack bitterly. 'I know what your opinion of me is. I am everything that is bad, of course.'

'Oh, Jack! that is unkind of you. You know that I don't think so. You know that I always link you with Aleck and Ross. Of course it was not right to go to Hickory's, but that didn't make you bad. Now tell me, didn't the Dangerfields take you, or at least persuade you to go?'

'No. But you are quite right, Mona,' said Jack, too generous to feel more than a passing annoyance and wounded

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pride at her gentle words. 'They are not up to the mark—the Levites' mark, I mean; it's so precious high. I don't care for them; only a fellow meets all sorts at school, and can't be always shunting like a luggage train to get out of the way of an express.'

'Then run on another line,' was the quick reply. 'There would be no shunting nor fear of a collision then. Keep to your simile.'

'All right,' said Jack, laughing with recovered good-humour. 'Bother the Dangerfields! Bother the picnic! Bother Hickory! Good-bye.'

Off he ran, making sundry good resolutions on his way. As he passed Mr. Harborough's gate, Cecile came out by herself, and crossed the road to the kitchen garden, which was opposite the house. She had drawn her hat low down over her eyes, and hurried across as if anxious to avoid observation. Jack raised his cap and stopped. Cecile and he were great friends.

'You are going to steal the fruit. Why, Cecile, what is the matter?' he exclaimed in astonishment, as she turned her tear-stained face towards him.

For a minute she could not speak, then the words came out, half choked with sobs. 'Nothing. I mean nothing much. Don't stop me, Jack, please; it's only a—a row I've got into at home. Don't say anything about it.'

The large brown eyes looked pleadingly at him, filled with something more than a mere childish grief.

Jack coloured up to his temples, partly from pleasure at her apparent trust in him, partly from an insane wish to go and knock somebody down. He knew well enough what sort of a row it had been, and what share Cecile had taken in it. Mr. Harborough's favourite occupation when intoxicated, namely, that of abusing and even striking his gentle, long-suffering wife and high-spirited little girls, was no secret to the Normans. Jack had witnessed more than one scene in that unhappy household. Cecile darted past him, and shut the gate; and then from the opposite side of the road came sounds which told their own story. Mr. Harborough was letting his family know that he was, and would be, master in his own house. Jack's lip curled involuntarily.

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'Brute!' he murmured. 'I wonder if he struck her.' The very thought sent the hot blood tingling through his veins. 'I'd like to see him do it! Poor Cecile!'

'What's up at Harborough's?' asked Ross, overtaking him. 'Weren't you talking to Cecile? There's some row going on, I fancy; the doors are banging off their hinges. Mr. Harborough at his domestic amusements, I suppose.'

The words were scarcely out of his lips when the front gate was thrown open violently, and Mr. Harborough reeled across the road, his face inflamed with drink and rage.

'Quick, Ross, quick! he's going after Cecile!' cried Jack, dashing back. The gate of the kitchen garden swung to in his face and almost knocked him down. Regardless of the lump which rose on his temple, he ran in full speed, but took the wrong path, the thick trees and shrubs hiding Mr. Harborough from view. Cecile's frightened voice, 'Oh, papa, don't!' told him in what direction to turn, and over the beds he went, regardless of the damage done. Some curious instinct seemed to have led Mr. Harborough straight to Cecile's hiding-place, and he stood in the doorway of the rustic summer-house, holding the child with an iron grip.

'So you dare to disobey me, do you?' he said, savagely shaking her, as if she were but a reed in his powerful hands. 'She's been teaching you to defy me, I suppose. I will teach you another lesson.'

'Mr. Harborough! sir!' cried Jack, panting with a perfect fury of indignant wrath; 'if you dare to touch her, I will raise the whole town. Leave her alone! Let her go! You will kill her, and then you will be hung!'

Mr. Harborough burst into a hoarse laugh. 'Kill her, shall I? Not quite, young man! But I mean to make her obey me.'

'Mr. Harborough,' said Ross's calm voice, 'I think you had better leave your daughter alone at present. People are congregating outside, and a word will bring them in.'

Intoxicated as he was, the wretched man had sufficient command of his senses to know that an exposé would be a disastrous thing for him in his business and social relations. Flinging Cecile from him, he turned and left the garden, returning to his own house. The boys stood perfectly still

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till his footsteps had died away, and then Jack sprang into the summer-house and lifted Cecile from the floor. She was almost stunned, and could not stand, so he sat down beside her and put his arm round her.

'Ross, go and tell mamma; bring her here,' he said, frightened by the whiteness of the delicate little face.

'No, no!' wailed Cecile; 'don't send for any one. Mamma can't bear any one to know. Oh, papa! papa! how can you be so cruel? You will kill us! you will kill us!'

'Don't, Cecile! don't, dear!' said Jack, with a big lump rising in his throat. 'He shan't hurt you, indeed he shan't! Old brute! I'd like to knock him down. Don't cry, Cecile. I can't bear to hear you cry.'

'She can't help it,' said Ross pityingly. 'Let her have it out, Jack; it will do her good.'

She could not help it. All control was gone, and amid a storm of hysterical sobs the sensitive, frightened child dropped her head on Jack's shoulder, and wept as if her heart would break.

In his simple, boyish fashion Jack tried to comfort her, not thinking how to make his words good.

'It will be all right, Cecile; he shan't do it again. He doesn't know what he's doing now, but when he comes to himself he will be ashamed of it. Hush, Cecile; don't! Did he hurt you?'

Instinctively the little hand went up as if to hide the marks on the soft white shoulder,—the red, burning marks of a man's strong fingers. All the manliness and chivalry in the boy's nature rose up in indignant anger, too great for words.

'He said he would be the death of us,' moaned Cecile. 'I believe he will. Oh, what shall we do? what shall we do?'

'Somebody ought to interfere,' said Jack hotly. 'I believe the law could punish him. What's the good of the law if it can't? Tell us all about it, Cecile; it will make you feel better.'

'He flung his boot at me, and then ordered me to pick it up and take it to him. He's been going on like that ever since he came down. He didn't come home till three o'clock this morning, and he'd been drinking dreadfully,' she sobbed.

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'What did you do?' asked Jack.

'I would not do it. I told him it was cruel to treat us like that, and then he came after me. Mamma opened the door and pushed me out, telling me to hide. I believe she thought he would kill me. Oh, poor mamma! her lips were white with fear.'

'Will he hurt her, do you think?' said Jack, casting a startled glance towards the house. 'Oughtn't some one to go and see?'

'Who can go? There is no one to go. I do feel so ill, Jack,' murmured the child, pressing her hands to her forehead. 'Will you please fetch mamma?'

'You are not going to faint, are you?' cried Jack in consternation. 'I say, Cecile, don't; there's a good girl. You mustn't faint.'

Ross was off like a shot, and in a few minutes Mrs. Norman was bathing Cecile's forehead, and applying restoratives, which soon brought back the colour to the little white face. As she lifted her head, looking round with bewildered eyes, Clarice glided noiselessly round the corner, but stopped short on seeing the group. Catching sight of Cecile in the midst, she sprang forward in an agony of terror.

'Is she dead? Oh, Mrs. Norman, has he killed her? Cecile! Cecile! speak to me!'

She threw herself on her knees, and, with a smile so sweet that it struck Mrs. Norman with a foreboding of ill, Cecile put her arms round her neck and drew her close.

'Hush, Clarice darling! don't,' she whispered; but her own tears mingled with her sister's, and her voice quivered into a sob.

With a face as black as night, Jack left the summer-house and walked up the garden. Ross followed.

'Look here,' cried Jack fiercely, his honest eyes dimmed by a most unusual moisture; 'what is the good of a law that can't protect helpless women and children from such a brute as that?'

'It can. If they liked to inform against him, he could be bound over to keep the peace.'

'Keep the peace! Keep the pieces of his poor wife's broken heart, you mean!' was the sarcastic reply. 'I'd like to break his head.'

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'There isn't a more gentlemanly fellow in Eastdale than Mr. Harborough when he's sober. I used to admire him when I was quite a little chap. Many a glass of wine I've had at his house,' said Ross. 'He took a fancy to me at one time, but he dropped me, as he has dropped nearly everybody, since this has grown upon him.'

'It is the sort of thing that does grow, and, like all ill weeds, grows apace,' said Jack, digging his heel savagely in the gravel, very much as if he were crushing some noxious weed out of existence. 'I wonder what the end will be.'

'What is usually the end of such things—death, of course, in some unpleasant form,' replied Ross listlessly. 'Poor little Cecile!'

Both Northland and the Cedars, as Mr. Harborough's house was called, lay some way out of the town, and had no near neighbours. They stood back in large gardens, screened from view by the thick foliage of the trees. Thankful for the isolation from the curious, gossiping world, Mrs. Norman took the little girls home with her. Maggie met them with open-eyed wonder, and Aleck sprang to his feet with an exclamation.

'Has he'— then pulled up hastily. He knew more than the others of Mr. Harborough's *in vino* propensities.

Clarice and Cecile were glad to escape to Mrs. Norman's room, where they comforted each other as best they could. Taken out of themselves by this episode, the boys forgot the unpleasant occurrence of the morning, at least Aleck and Jack did.

Invitations to the picnic had arrived for Mrs. Norman and Maggie, but the subject was not mentioned till dinner was over.

'Of course you will go, mamma,' said Aleck.

'Yes; for Maggie's sake,' was the doubtful reply.

'I am not going,' said that young lady calmly.

The boys stared. This was quite a new turn, even for her changeable little ladyship.

'Why not? Why, Maggie, you were wild to go. What is the matter now?'

Maggie's grey eyes flashed curiously, as they were wont to do when she was under the influence of great excitement.

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'What is it, Maggie?' asked Jack inquisitively.

'If Dr. Winslow does not choose to ask you, there is no occasion for him to trouble himself to send me an invitation! If he thinks I am going to his picnic he is greatly mistaken.'

All this was said with great dignity, and Maggie was not prepared for the burst of laughter which greeted it. Poor Jack was in a very unenviable frame of mind. Wrath against Mr. Harborough and mortification at his own disgrace combined to reduce his usually sweet temper to a state of irritability hard to bear. What to do with himself he did not know, and Maggie's would-be dignified speech gave him just the outlet he wanted. Laugh or storm he must, and he did the former.

Maggie could stand anything but ridicule. It had cost no little effort to give up the picnic; indeed, it had been a small heroism, in which her generous little heart had rejoiced through all the disappointment. It was for Jack, her favourite brother. His amused, half-sneering laugh was more than she could bear. Darting from her seat, she dashed out of the room in a paroxysm of grief and rage. In vain Mrs. Norman called her to come back. She heard nothing but Jack's loud, irritating laugh, which seemed to echo in her head. Out at the side door and down the shrubbery she ran, and, turning a corner, stumbled, and fell into Frank Harley's arms.

'Hallo! what's up?' he cried, not very politely. 'Who's after you?'

'What do you want here?' said Maggie angrily, ignoring his question. 'What right have you in our shrubbery?'

She knew him by sight, as one of the town boys, about whom she held very decided views.

It was awkward for Frank, who was particularly anxious to have a private interview with Ross before he started for school. The shrill, peculiar whistle, which was the signal, would not do now; he must go openly to work.

'I want to see your brother Ross,' he said, feeling rather uncomfortable under the steady scrutiny of the queer grey eyes. 'Will you tell him? I only want him a minute.'

Go back to that room and hear that hateful laugh! No, indeed! Not for twenty town's boys!

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'You may go to the back door and send a message by one of the servants,' was the ungracious reply.

And without vouchsafing another glance at the perplexed, good-humoured face, Maggie walked on with stately dignity. What right had this boy to come stealing round her shrubbery asking for her brother by his Christian name; it changed the current of her thoughts, and set her busy brain to work: for this was a problem hard to solve. What possible business could this rough lower school boy have with her fastidious brother Ross? She would not have been much enlightened had she heard the conversation between the two.

Summoned by the servant, Ross went out, and found Frank taking flying leaps over the old sun-dial.

'What is it?' he asked, with inward misgiving. For no small thing would Frank have sought him at his own home.

'A nice mess! Dalglish is determined to find out who it was getting in at the window. He has found out by some means, or guesses it, which amounts to the same thing, that some of the day boys were mixed up in it, and he's going to hold an inquisition this afternoon, and ask every blessed soul in the school. Those who have already denied will stick to their tale, but what are we to do?'

'What will Parker do?'

'Deny it, up hill and down dale. He's safe enough. No morality dodge for him. The question is, what are you going to do?'

'I? What do you mean to do yourself?'

Frank whistled, but made no reply. Ross walked slowly down the shrubbery, buried in thought. It was a moment of torture to the proud, sensitive boy. To be publicly questioned and exposed, even though for nothing more than aiding the boarders in an unlawful but otherwise harmless frolic, was more than he could face. Had there been nothing worse behind he would have shrunk from it with the sort of physical pain which only such temperaments are capable of feeling; but with its background of a deeper, darker stain, his heart failed, and a faint, sick feeling crept over him. His face showed something of the tumult within, and Frank's face grew grave.

'It's worse for you than for us,' he said, unconscious that

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every word was a sting. 'A few rows more or less won't hurt us. We've no character to lose. I wish I hadn't persuaded you to come. There is only one way out of it, that I can see.'

'What! add a lie to the rest? A nice way out, truly!' said Ross, with bitter self-contempt.

'No; I know perfectly well it is no use to suggest that course to you. Can't you manage to get up an illness of some sort, and stay at home this afternoon? If you could lie by, doing the interesting invalid for a few days, it would land you safely on the other side. Dalglish won't get anything out of us, and the whole affair will have blown over by the time you appear on the scene. Now, Norman, that is harmless enough for a saint. You don't deny anything. You only hold your tongue.'

'Very well,' said Ross, after a pause. '*Che sara, sara!*'

But though he spoke with an affectation of indifference, his brow was damp with the force of an inward agony. The *rencontre* with Maggie had slipped Frank's memory. He remembered it on his way home; but it was too late then to let Ross know. Besides, he did not attach any importance to it.

Ross went back to the dining-room and threw himself on the couch—no unusual thing for him to do, and it attracted no attention.

'Who was it?' asked Aleck.

'One of the fellows, with a book I lent him,' he replied, telling his first lie with unsteady lips. The quiver in his voice did not pass unnoticed. His mother went to his side and passed her hand caressingly over his damp forehead.

'Don't you feel well, my darling?'

'Not very. I have felt queer all day.' The words came slowly, and with effort.

'Then you must lie still and rest; indeed you must, Ross. I shall not let you go to school.'

He turned his head restlessly, burying his face in the cushions.

'You must tell Dr. Winslow, Aleck,' she continued, watching her boy with anxious, loving eyes. 'Is it your head, Ross?'

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'Yes—no; I feel faint. I think I will go to my own room and lie down. I shall be quiet there.'

It was torture to lie there and be watched and questioned.

'The best thing you can do,' said his mother, relieved that he did not persist in going to school. 'I will come and draw down the venetians, and make it as cool as possible.'

'I can't think what's the matter with everybody,' grumbled Jack. 'Everything goes wrong to-day. A nice time I have of it!'

In a very injured frame of mind he snatched up his satchel and set off for school, forgetting all about Mona's invitation for Maggie.

As soon as the boys were off, and Ross apparently asleep on his own bed, Mrs. Norman went to look for her little tempest of a daughter. Not being familiar with her favourite haunt, she wandered twice past the old ivy-covered tree in which Miss Maggie sat, curled in anything but a comfortable fashion. Not the most obedient of daughters at the best of times, she was especially defiant now, and listened with naughty satisfaction to her mother's gentle calls.

Tired of the fruitless search, Mrs. Norman at last went in to see how her little visitors fared. They were sitting on the couch—Cecile with her aching head on her sister's shoulder. There were dark rings round her eyes, and her hands were hot and feverish.

'You ought to go to bed, dear,' said Mrs. Norman, again painfully struck by the sweetness and fragility of the patient little face. 'Will you come and lie down on Maggie's bed? it will do you good to go to sleep.'

'No, thank you. Oh, dear Mrs. Norman, will you please let mamma know we are here; she will be so frightened! Don't you think we had better go home now?'

'No, certainly not. I will go myself and see your mamma, if you like, dear. I am only afraid'— Mrs. Norman paused, scarcely knowing how to express herself. The children read her thoughts, and Clarice answered sorrowfully,—

'I don't think it can matter now, Mrs. Norman; everybody must know. Mamma will not mind you; you are so kind.'

Kissing them in the fulness of her compassionate sympathy, Mrs. Norman put on her bonnet and went to see Mrs.

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Harborough. Though neighbours, they were not more than acquaintances, for, with a reserve which was generally attributed to pride, Mrs. Harborough shunned all society.

The servant who opened the door looked scared and frightened, and scarcely answered her hesitating inquiry. There was an atmosphere of unrest pervading the place, which had its effect on Mrs. Norman; she began to regret coming. The feeling amounted to positive terror when the dining-room door was flung open and Mr. Harborough himself appeared.

With a superfluity of courtesy he insisted upon her coming in, and with a peculiar smile on his face ushered her into the room where Mrs. Harborough sat, mute and white.

'My dear, here is Mrs. Norman. Quite a rare and unexpected pleasure. Mrs. Harborough is delighted to see you. Are you not, my dear?'

His voice was thick and slightly unsteady, and the expression with which he regarded his unhappy wife was indicative of anything rather than conjugal affection.

She gave him one appealing glance, and her lips trembled. Recovering her self-possession with an effort, she returned Mrs. Norman's greeting, and then sank back in her chair, unable to control the trembling of her limbs.

Scarcely knowing what she was saying, Mrs. Norman stammered out a few commonplaces respecting the weather, the town, and the school.

Still smiling, Mr. Harborough replied, keeping up a sort of conversation, and continually appealing to his wife.

'Dr. Winslow is giving a picnic next week—is it? You are going, no doubt, Mrs. Norman? I believe we have an invitation, eh, my dear?'

'Yes.'

'And you are going, of course?—you and the girls; you will not refuse, for their sake. Children like amusement, Mrs. Norman; it is natural. Your boys, no doubt, are looking forward to it. Fine boys—very. Master what's-his-name?—the youngest—is a fine lad. By the way, my dear, where are the girls? Mrs. Norman will like to see them.'

The poor mother looked at him with a world of agony in her tearless eyes, but did not—could not speak. Mr. Harborough leaned back in his chair and laughed. Indignant

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and sick at heart, Mrs. Norman rose to go. It was impossible to introduce her errand, and her very presence seemed an insult to the dignity of the injured wife. Such scenes were best without witnesses.

Mr. Harborough himself conducted her to the door, thereby frustrating her design to whisper the children's safety to the servant, and leave it to her to tell their mother.

Returning to her own home, she forced Cecile to lie down, and sat beside her till, worn out with weeping, the weary child fell asleep. It was nearly tea-time when she awoke, refreshed and quieted. Maggie had forsaken her hiding-place, and was in one of her most provoking moods. The marks on Cecile's bare shoulder caught her eyes, and she was instantly full of curiosity.

'Did your papa do that, Cecile? Didn't it hurt dreadfully? What made him do it? Were you disobedient?'

'Yes,' said Cecile, with quivering lips, trying to draw the lace of her frock over the tell-tale marks.

'Well, I think it was a wicked shame to hurt you like that, even if you were ever so disobedient. Mamma never hurts me.'

There was some compunction in Miss Maggie's voice, as she thought how patiently all her haughtiness and disobedience were borne by her gentle mother.

'I think your papa is very wicked and cruel,' she added indignantly.

'No, he is not, Maggie,' said Cecile, her face flushing. 'He is never unkind except when he has taken too much wine or brandy.'

'Then why does he take too much?' argued contentious Maggie. 'Brandy is nasty stuff. I hate it! I think it is stupid to drink it.'

'It is worse than stupid!' cried Clarice hotly. 'It is wicked! I wish there were no brandy in the world!'

'Then he would drink wine,' said Maggie, acting Job's comforter. 'I like wine, and so do our boys. But they never drink too much.'

'Maggie, what are you chattering about? Go down-stairs, and don't make a noise, or you will awake Ross,' said Mrs. Norman, coming in with noiseless step.

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'Ross! why, he hasn't come home yet.'

'He has not been to school; he is not well. Go down and ask Jack not to make a noise. We are all coming down to tea in a few minutes.'

'But he was well enough at dinner—before that boy came,' persisted Maggie, not moving from her seat on the window-sill. 'What's the matter with him? Where is he?'

'In his own room, lying down. Now, be a good child and go down-stairs.'

Maggie slid off her seat, and went out.

'I'd like to know what he wanted Ross for,' she thought. 'I wish I had heard! It is funny! What should it make him ill for? It would take a lot to make me ill.'

Then in the middle of the puzzle came an idea which made her pause aghast. Perhaps Ross had done something very dreadful, and it had been found out! What could it be? Surmising was of no use; so she went on down-stairs, resolving in her precocious, busy little mind to watch events. Mysteries and Maggie were uncongenial.

The boys came in hot, tired, and Jack, at least, in anything but a pleasant mood. Maggie's injunction to quietness was received with an angry scowl and a groan, as he flung himself and his satchel down on the couch.

'Tea is quite ready. You had better go and put yourself tidy; Cecile and Clarice are here—and you look such a fright,' said his sister politely.

'Don't you talk about frights, you little wild Indian, with your hair all over your head! Has that old brute been here?'

'What old brute?'

'Harborough. Good for you if he were your father, Miss.'

'It wouldn't be good for him,' replied Maggie, with a sudden flash.

'I wish he had you for a week. I'd come to see the fun. I guess he'd be willing to exchange for a wild cat before the week was out! Get away, you great big bully! Aren't you ashamed to ill-treat your little brother like that?'

'No,' said Aleck, who had coolly rolled him off the couch. 'Come up-stairs, and make yourself fit to be seen.'

It was not a happy party at the tea-table that night. Ross did not appear. Clarice and Cecile were quiet and dejected.

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Aleck for some cause was evidently put out and annoyed; while Jack was in one of his worst tempers.

'What *is* the matter, Jack?' asked his mother, with wild surprise, as he sent the cat flying out of the room, and banged the door after it.

'I hate cats—nasty things! I'll drown it next week, see if I don't.'

'If you do I'll—I'll tell Dr. Winslow about Hickory,' cried Maggie defiantly.

Jack started, and then burst into a laugh.

'Too late, my dear. Somebody else has performed that kind office for you. I say—I quite forgot! Mona is expecting you there to tea. I was to tell you this morning. Fly now!'

'It is too late; how came you to forget?' said his mother quickly, dreading an explosion from one or the other of these two fiery natures; both looked ready for it.

'You'd forget if you had all the bothers I have. I say, Aleck, what does the Doctor mean? I'd like to know.'

'By what?'

'After Dalglish had asked the whole school about that affair—you know.'

'What affair?' said Mrs. Norman anxiously.

'Some of the boarders have been having a lark, and Dalglish is determined to find out all about it. He has been questioning the school,' said Jack impatiently. 'I knew nothing about it, and I said so. Dr. Winslow overtook me at the bridge, and stopped and asked me if I'd really told Dalglish that I knew nothing about it. Of course I had! He didn't want me to tell a lie and say I did know something did he? And then he said, in that cool, contemptuous way of his that makes a fellow mad, "Neither do you know anything about the caricature, I presume?" Now I should just like to know what he means? I declare things are getting unbearable. He actually thinks I know something about that blessed procession.'

'That is natural, perhaps,' said Aleck, with a warning, significant glance. 'Others, as unlikely, knew.'

Though the boys talked openly enough of their own affairs, they never mentioned each other's; there were things best not

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mentioned. Ross had puzzled both Aleck and Jack that morning, but his affairs were not always theirs, and they were not accustomed to trouble about each other's private concerns.

Maggie listened with keen interest while Jack grumbled away to a sympathizing audience. Even Clarice and Cecile forgot their own troubles and entered into the conversation.

'What night was it that Mr. Dalglish saw them getting in by the window?' demanded Maggie suddenly.

'Last Thursday. I was in bed, I know, that night. I don't go picnicking by moonlight! not I forsooth! My word, I am in the Doctor's black books. You should have seen his face.'

'There is something wrong somewhere,' said Aleck. 'I don't like it at all, Jack. Have you any enemy? It is quite clear that the Doctor hears more about you than you have any idea of. You will have to go and speak to him yourself.'

'I will,' replied Jack; but he was too easy and careless to carry out the resolution, and let the whole thing drop. No more was said about the caricature. The boys waited day by day, one of them rather anxiously; but, as time passed and the subject was never mentioned, they concluded that the Doctor intended to pass it over. Aubrey began to breathe more freely.

At Northland, Ross studiously avoided all reference to the much-discussed subject. At school he was more or less questioned as to his knowledge, which had excited universal curiosity. Dr. Winslow alone seemed satisfied. He thought that Ross was screening some one; who that one was he did not say.

The day of the picnic arrived, and a group of boys watched the departure of such as were fortunate enough to be invited. Two of the Normans were absent, Ross and Jack. The former pleaded a wretched headache; had he added heart-ache he would have been nearer the truth.

His debts were hanging upon him heavily, and he knew not where to get the money to pay them. Only one course seemed open to him, namely, to send Frank again to Mother Balls. He had delayed doing this from day to day, hoping, with a species of dejected hopelessness, for deliverance in some other way. Already his dead father's chain and ring

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were in the keeping of those harpies in Weaver's Lane, and he despaired of ever getting them back again.

Want of money has led to many an otherwise uncommitted crime. The thief is no thief by predilection, nor the forger a forger. Necessity comes first; then temptation; then crime.

Curiously enough, these and similar thoughts passed through the boy's mind as he sat alone in his room, with his face bowed upon his hands. The house was unusually quiet and still. Maggie, finding her plan of self-abnegation unappreciated by ungrateful Jack, had philosophically changed her mind and gone to the picnic with her mother and Aleck. One of the servants had gone home, and the other was out of sound or hearing.

'Want of money has tempted many to crime! What in the world do I keep repeating that for?' he muttered angrily. 'As if I were going to turn thief!' A shrill whistle from the garden disturbed him, and with a sinking heart he rose and went down-stairs and out into the shrubbery.

'I thought I should just catch you nicely,' said Frank. 'I saw them all off to the picnic, and watched Jack down to the river. Here's another pretty mess for us, Norman!'

'What is it now?'

Frank lowered his voice. 'I have had such a row with my father. He vows I shall never take another bottle out of the shop again till I've paid for the last lot. He's been overhauling things, and that sneak Watkins told him "Master Frank" had taken the bottles by dozens! I'd like to choke him. He—my father—is going to horsewhip me, or something worse. I left him raging, and mother in hysterics! The worst of it is—and he means it—he says, if I don't get the money he will go straight to Dr. Winslow and tell him all about it. That won't do, you know!'

'How long does he give you?' asked Ross, forcing the words from his nerveless lips. A horror had fallen on him,—that of exposure and disgrace,—and he could scarcely speak.

Frank looked at him wonderingly. 'Are you ill? Why, what's a pound or two, more or less? Don't bother about that. But, I say, Norman, you do go in for it! You drink three times as much as I do; that is, if you drink all I bring you.'

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'I can't work without it,' said Ross, with an inward shiver. 'Come up to my room, and talk it over.'

They went in, and he sank down on his bed, white and trembling.

'You *are* ill!' cried Frank in dismay. 'What's the matter? Shall I call somebody?'

'No; wait a minute.'

Minutes passed, but still he sat motionless, his head resting against the bed-post. Frank grew alarmed.

'I say, Norman, this won't do! I shall go and fetch some one if you don't speak. Have some brandy; where can I find some?'

There was no reply, and he looked eagerly round the room in search of the brandy, which he knew must be there. A cupboard by the side of the fireplace caught his eye, and he sprang to it. It was locked.

'Phew! this is nice! Hallo, Norman! hand out your keys, there's a good fellow. I suppose this is the secret store.'

Making a fearful effort, Ross drew out a key, and let it fall on the floor. Frank seized it and opened the cupboard. There were bottles enough; all of them familiar to him. He looked for a glass, but could not see one, and was too much alarmed to improvise a drinking vessel.

'Bother a glass! Here, drink out of the bottle; what's the odds so long as you get the brandy?' he said, tipping up the bottle with more zeal than discretion. Part of the fiery contents went down Ross's throat, but much more was upset. Wiping it up as he best could, with a not over-large pocket-handkerchief, Frank sat down across a chair and watched Ross.

'There, you are better now. I knew that would bring you to,' he said heartily. 'Come now, Norman, lie down a bit.'

'It was a sort of faint, I suppose. I often have it,' said Ross wearily. 'What a confounded smell!'

'Bother the stuff! I wish it had no smell. It will let the cat out of the bag, won't it? Burn some brown paper.'

'It will be all right before any one comes here. I'll get rid of it.'

Frank sat in uncomfortable silence, feeling out of his element altogether. 'What is a fellow to do when another

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fellow's ill?' he said to himself crossly. 'He ought to go to bed and have a doctor.'

The fact was, he was a little frightened. Ross looked so deadly pale and worn that he feared more than he dared own. All that he had heard of the effects of wine, beer, and brandy upon the constitution came back to his memory with a rush, and he felt a guilty consciousness of responsibility.

'What makes you faint and turn queer?' he asked abruptly. 'Have you got anything the matter with your inside?'

Ross was at that moment asking himself the same question. For months he had been subject to these sinking, fainting feelings; but a glass of wine or brandy had always given relief, and he had felt no alarm. It came to him now forcibly that there must be something radically wrong to produce such feelings, and he remained silent, pondering it over.

'It isn't this, is it?' said Frank, lowering his voice cautiously, and pointing to the brandy. 'I know these teetotal fellows say it undermines the constitution, and you have taken an awful lot lately.'

'I have been obliged to take it. I should lose everything if I did not; it keeps me up. Besides, what a fool you are, Frank! don't they always give brandy to people when they faint? I only take it to keep me up to the mark. Of course such fellows as Harborough undermine their constitution; what I take can't hurt mine.'

'Well, don't get in a rage over it. I suppose Harborough began with a little, didn't he?' retorted Frank. 'I shan't bother myself about it; it's your own look-out, of course. Only if I looked as you do I should begin to think of making my will, that's all.'

Ross got up and went to the glass. 'You are a pleasant sort of companion,' he said sarcastically. 'One of Job's comforters! Your father doesn't know that I have anything out of his shop, does he?'

'Not he! you don't suppose I told him that? He guesses it was for some of the boarders, and I let him think so. You are not the only one; I take all sorts of things up to the residents, so he is right so far. Patrick owes me as much as you do very nearly. He is always in debt.'

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'With the difference of a rich father to pay it for him,' said Ross bitterly. 'What a fool I am.'

'Not more than other folks,' was the consoling reply. 'We are all fools more or less; that's my opinion. I'm one, I know. But what are we to do?'

'When does your father want the money?'

'If I promise it to him next week it will do. Can you manage it?'

'I must! necessity has no choice. You must go to Mother Balls to-night, I suppose.'

Frank's face grew long. 'Not any more jewelry, is it?'

'Why not?' said Ross sharply.

'For a very simple reason. Mother Ball is frightened; there's been some row about some jewelry, and the police have made the old lady quake in her shoes! She declares she won't take any more rings or chains to please all the schoolboys in the world. You should have heard her last time! My word! didn't she swear! You see there's often a bother about jewelry; getting rid of it if it isn't redeemed.'

'Then I don't know what to do,' said Ross in despair. 'Can't you manage to get the money, Frank? I'll pay you as soon as I can.'

'Why, I'm over head and ears and heels in debt myself! I wouldn't have come to you if I could have helped it, Norman; I wouldn't indeed. But the fact is, I was obliged to. I don't know where to turn for a penny, and my father is a regular Tartar! Isn't there anything else you could send—plate?'

'No.'

'You will have to tell Mrs. Norman,' said Frank, after a pause. Ross flushed crimson, up to the very temples.

'That I will never do! At least she shall never know. It would break her heart.'

'Hearts are not so easily broken,' said Frank philosophically. 'My mother threatens every day to break hers in pieces, but I haven't seen any of the bits lying about yet. But I am not a genius, you see, and I daresay that makes a difference.'

'Shut up about your genius!' exclaimed Ross savagely. 'It does not require much genius to get into debt.'

'It does to get out, though! Well, look here, I must go. I have to see Aubrey and Patrick this afternoon, and do no

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end of things. I'll come up again this evening, and hear what you have decided to do.'

Ross nodded absently. He was revolving many things in his mind, but arriving at no satisfactory conclusion. His brain felt clouded and stupid, and his head ached furiously. When he rose from his seat the room seemed to go whirling round, and he staggered like a drunken man.

'What is the matter with me?' he wondered, dropping his bewildered head on the table. 'I feel as if I were sea-sick! I cannot be ill! I daren't be ill now!'

The brandy stood within reach, and with desperate eagerness he stretched out his hand. The craving for something to restore his brain-power was irresistible. Drinking out of the bottle, he did not know how much he took; by the effect only could he guess. He felt refreshed and exhilarated, and the heavy weight hanging upon him seemed suddenly lightened. He even laughed, as he walked rather unsteadily across the room to replace the bottle in the cupboard.

'What a fuss about nothing!' he said airily, his face flushed, and his eyes unnaturally bright. 'The money will come somehow. I am not going to bother myself about it. I wonder what in the world would become of me without my wine and brandy? there would be very little chance of a prize, I reckon.'

He sat down to his desk and commenced writing. For about an hour he worked hard, for every nerve was strained. Thoughts flowed readily from the heated brain, and as his rapid pen skimmed the paper he grew yet more feverish with the excitement of conscious success.

But presently pen and brain began to lag. A drowsy, uncomfortable feeling crept over him, and his thoughts began to wander from the subject. He made a violent effort to recall them, shutting his eyes, and repeating his last lines over and over again. It was of no use; the consecutive thread was lost, and he could scarcely understand the sense of his own words. He gazed at the paper with bewildered eyes, till the letters began to glide one into the other, and he could see neither rhyme nor meaning in the confused lines. With a feeling too numb for despair he dropped his head upon his arms, and fell asleep.

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He was awakened some hours later by a violent knocking at his door.

'Who is there?' he said languidly.

'Ross! Ross! Wake up! Are you dead, or asleep, or what?'

He opened the door, and Jack came in, with a startled look in his eyes.

'I declare I thought you were dead! Here I've been knocking and shouting for the last ten minutes enough to wake the seven sleepers. I was just going round to put a ladder to the window. What is the matter?'

'I was asleep. What time is it?'

'Nearly five. Rebekah thought you were out. Have you been here ever since morning? Why, Ross, you are the queerest fellow! You've had no dinner.'

'I forgot all about it. I tell you I've been asleep.'

Jack gazed at him suspiciously. 'It strikes me you are ill. You look awfully seedy.'

'It is my head. Where have you been all day?'

And then he forced himself to listen to Jack's glowing account of a race on the river, as they sat over their solitary tea. It was difficult to feign the proper amount of interest, and he made such random answers that at last Jack subsided into silence and took up a book.

Listless and preoccupied, Ross toyed with his tea, refusing with disgust all solid food; the very sight of it was hateful. He managed to eat a few biscuits.

'I wonder if I shall get the French prize?' sighed Jack. 'I am pretty sure of the drawing prize. I don't seem to care much about it though.'

'Jack, have you any spare cash now?' said Ross abruptly, evidently hearing nothing.

'Not a cent! Are you in another mess with that Parker? I say, Ross, you must be a soft.'

'It isn't Parker. I want some money dreadfully, Jack; can't you suggest ways and means?' said Ross, his calm tone conveying no impression of urgency, and telling nothing of the inward fever of anxiety and dread.

'What a lot of money you do get rid of! I can't think how you manage it. Ways and means, indeed! Not I.'

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There was no hope from Jack; that was evident.

It was late when Frank made his appearance, and Ross ran down to meet him.

'Wait till the day after to-morrow, Frank, will you? Tell your father he shall be paid next week,' he said hurriedly. 'I can't decide anything to-night; but you shall have the money somehow next week.'

'Don't you want me to go to Mother Balls, then?'

'No; wait, at least, till Saturday. I shall know then what to do. I mean it will be settled one way or the other.'

Frank stared, unable to understand the somewhat enigmatical sentence.

'All right; there's no hurry this week. I've told Aubrey and the other fellows, and they are in a nice stew! Aubrey says he'll pawn his head before he sends home for more money. I told him no one would advance him twopence on it, except a medical student for dissection. They must manage somehow, for, to tell you the truth, Norman, I dare not put my father off any longer.'

Frank spoke low, his merry eyes clouded with vexation and annoyance. 'You see,' he added apologetically, 'he doesn't take things quietly; he's so hot-tempered.'

Ross had heard vague rumours of Mr. Harley's temper, especially when heightened by a certain amount of his own spirits. For he was one of those anomalous tradesmen, grocers, licensed to sell wine and spirits. People said the licence covered more than half his business. It is certain that many of the more respectable families in Eastdale preferred his shop to the higher class ones in the High Street which were not licensed. Why they did so was their own business, of course, and Mr. Harley's; doubtless he was aware of the nature of the attraction. Even grocers licensed to sell wine and spirits are not blind to their own interests.

At another time Ross would not have cared one straw if Mr. Harley had a good or bad temper; now it was a subject of engrossing interest.

'Do you think he really will go to Dr. Winslow?' he asked, as quietly as he could force himself to speak.

'I know he will,' was the emphatic reply. 'You see what that will lead to. The Doctor will hold an inquisition to find

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out who have had the things. I shall be put to the rack, I suppose. If he'd be satisfied with pitching into me, it wouldn't matter; I could stand it without breaking any bones, I daresay. But if he questions every fellow on his honour, what will you do—and the rest? It will have to come out.'

'Oh, your father must be paid, of course!' interrupted Ross hastily. 'It must never come to the Doctor. Your father is a queer one to get his own son into trouble. You would probably be expelled, Frank.'

'My father isn't always himself,' replied Frank quietly. 'Like a great many better men than he, he doesn't know when he has had enough. Well, good-night, Norman.'

He vaulted over the wall and disappeared. Ross went back to his room and wrote a letter. More than an hour later he took the nearest cut down to Eastdale post office, and after looking cautiously round dropped his letter in the box.

It was dark, but the moon was beginning to rise—a great red ball over the downs. A man coming out of a public-house stumbled against Ross, and almost knocked him down.

'Beg pardon,' he said gruffly, and would have passed, but Ross stopped.

'Why, Briggs! is that you? I thought you were at York.'

'I've come back, sir; they turned me out of my place, and I couldn't get nothing to do.'

'Are you any better off here? How came they to turn you off?'

'Mr. Weston was so awful particular,' said the young man, in an injured tone. 'He grudged a poor chap his drop o' beer—wouldn't let us touch it! When a gentleman interferes with a chap's beer, I say he isn't a gentleman, and I holds to it. That's my opinion.'

'Wouldn't he let you have any? or did you take too much, Briggs?'

'He wouldn't let any one in his establishment take or touch a drop. That's the truth, sir. He's one of them teetotal bodies. Faugh!'

'You've had too much now, or you would not speak like

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that, Briggs,' said Ross severely. 'What will Jane say? Have you been up to see her?'

Muttering an unintelligible reply, Briggs touched his cap and started off. He was a gardener, not bearing the best of characters for steadiness, and was engaged to one of the servants at Northland.

Ross went on, but was destined to meet acquaintances. This time it was Frank, his face ghastly in the dim light. A great bruise burned on his left temple and his eyes glowed with intense, restrained passion.

'Let me go!' he said, in a smothered voice, as Ross, in his terror, seized his arm. 'Don't hold me, Norman—I'm dangerous!'

'What is the matter?' said Ross, feeling his face turn white. 'Has your father been to the Doctor?'

There was no reply. A perfect storm of fury was shaking the boy from head to foot.

'Come with me. If you go on you will meet some one. Come back to our garden,' said Ross, in his alarm speaking with unusual authority. Frank turned mechanically; it did not matter to him which way he went. Neither spoke till they had reached the outskirts of the town.

'What is it?' asked Ross, dreading the reply, and feeling faint with the dread. The short walk had been a long torture.

Then Frank burst into incoherent speech. The veins in his face stood out like whipcord, and his hands shook with passion.

'Why should I stand it? What right has he to treat us as if we were dogs? I have borne it as long as I can! I'll never go back!—never!'

This, and much more of similar character fell on Ross's astonished ear.

'Is it your father, Frank? What was it all about?' he asked, breathless with suspense.

'He ordered me to tell him for whom I had had the things,—the brandy and other things,—and said I intended to steal them. He called me a thief!' stormed Frank. 'I told him I'd as soon be a thief as a drunkard, and so I would! Then, not content with bullying me, he turned on poor mother,

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and frightened her into hysterics—real ones this time!' he added, a recollection of what he had said that morning coming over him. 'She has a nice time with him! I wonder she isn't dead. I shall be if this goes on. But I won't stand it! I'll go to sea! I should have gone long ago but for mother.'

He raved on, vowing all sorts of things, and then contradicting them, as is the fashion with angry people. Ross waited till he had cooled down a little.

'Did he give you that bruise?'

Frank put up his hand. 'What bruise? He shook me as if I had been drowned puppy!'

Why, or in what particular fashion, people shake drowned puppies, it would probably have puzzled him to explain.

'What are you going to do now?'

'I don't know,' was the gloomy reply.

'You must go home, Frank; your father will be in an awful rage if you don't, and will go straight to the Doctor. You must go home.'

'That I shall not!' said Frank. 'It won't be the first time I've stayed out all night. I shan't go home till he has cooled down. I tell you what it is, Norman; I shall be off to sea one of these days, as sure as fate. I shan't stand it much longer.'

'Is he often like this?'

'No; that's the only thing that makes it bearable. He has fits. It is drink, drink, drink, from morning till night!'

'How long do they last?'

'Depends upon circumstances; generally they last a week or fortnight. He's just had them, Norman, and all the talking in the world makes no difference. He's been on now ever since Monday. I shall see how he is to-morrow. If I thought I should ever be like him I would'— Frank paused, looking unutterable things.

'Never touch a drop of anything stronger than tea again!' said Ross half contemptuously.

'No,' said Frank stoutly, 'that I never would. Well, it is no use wasting time here. I feel easier in my mind now.' He laughed, an odd, forced laugh, as he nodded good-night

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and turned away. The next moment he came running back.

'Is there much of a bruise? I remember about it now. He flung a candlestick at me! It's all right.'

He vanished in the darkness, and Ross went home to supper. A little later they returned from the picnic, and the long weary day came to an end.

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CHAPTER III.

ROSS NORMAN'S LOVE OF DRINK.

'I wish the press-gang or the drum
Would with its rattling music come,
And sweep him from the village.'

Wordsworth.

FRANK was in his usual place the next day, and the great black bruise on his forehead attracted general attention. Mr. Dalglish, with whom he was no favourite, inquired sarcastically if he had fallen down and hurt himself; to which he replied in the affirmative. No one believed him, of course. Aubrey asked if he had been fighting; he and one or two others had a suspicion of the truth.

Frank doubled his fists, went through a pantomimic fight with an imaginary foe, nodded, winked, and walked away. That was all they got out of him. It was, to say the least, unsatisfactory.

'Have you been home yet?' asked Ross.

'No; I do not intend to go till next week.'

'But won't there be a row, Frank? Your father will come here after you.'

'No, he won't. I have sent him notice of my intention. He won't expect me till Monday night. The fact is, I've written him a nice filial letter, and told him he doesn't deserve a good son!'

'Do be serious, Frank, for once in your life, if you can,' said Ross angrily.

'I am serious. I wrote to him this morning before I came

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to school, and said that as it was his pleasure to brand me a thief, I should not condescend to enter his house again till I came with the money in my hand. I said he might expect me on Monday, when I hoped he would be able to treat me like a gentleman.' Frank spoke like a model of injured innocence, and looked like a scamp, with his bruised face and rough head.

'Where did you sleep last night?'

'At Hickory's, over the barn. It was jolly! You won't fail me to-morrow night, Norman?'

'No,' said Ross, feeling desperate. He walked away, unable to bear Frank's free remarks. The next day he left the dinner-table early, on pretence of urgent business in town, and went to meet the postman. There was a letter for him, and his hand trembled as he took it. To open it and take in the contents at a glance was the work of very few moments.

'So sorry to disappoint you! Can't possibly send you a fiver; am waiting remittances now. If next Monday week will do, I'll send a couple of sovs.—all I can spare.'

The rest of the letter was never read! With a fierce exclamation of disappointment and despair, Ross tore the paper in fragments, and scattered them on the river as he leaned over the wall. His last hope was gone. Where to turn for help now he did not know. Apply to his mother he would not; he knew he had had her last spare shilling. Not three weeks ago he had gone to her for extra money, and she, too indulgent to refuse, had given him all she could. He always had more than the other boys, though they did not know it. The small allowance which was all she could give them was rarely overrun. Even careless Jack managed to make it do, though occasionally he was in debt, and he never knew what it was to have spare cash. Aleck, good, thoughtful, high-principled Aleck, never exceeded his allowance.

All the better for Ross. Every half-crown or half-sovereign that Mrs. Norman could possibly spare went into his purse.

'What do you do with your money, dear?' she sometimes asked, surprised at its rapid disappearance.

'I'm sure I don't know,' he would reply. 'It goes somehow, and there's nothing to show for it.'

'Be as careful as you can, my darling,' she would say

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fondly, as she slipped one of her last half-sovereigns into his hand; 'I wish I had more to give you;' and then she would sigh to think she was obliged to deny her poor boy. If ever the thought crossed her that it was not fair for Ross to take the lion's share, she quieted herself with the excuse that he had inherited his dear father's expensive tastes, and needed more than Aleck or Jack. She little knew where the money went. And had she known, her feeling would have been one of pity and commiseration, for she would not have realized the full meaning of all she saw or heard. That Ross frequently turned into the large handsome confectioner's shop in Lee Street on his way to school, and languidly called for a glass of cherry brandy, would to her have been indicative only of the dear boy's weakness and want of stamina, and nothing else. Weakness had undoubtedly led to the formation of the habit. Many a time Ross had felt his brain unequal to the task before it, and had sought to revive his flagging energies by means of a stimulant. He had gone to school with apparently invigorated mental power, which had carried him triumphantly through the dreaded task, and naturally he had ascribed it all to that one potent influence. No wonder that, ambitious and proud as he was, he should again and again seek eagerly the help of this ready auxiliary to maintain his position in the school. It had become at last a necessity, and he was right in saying that but for it he stood no chance of prize or honour. But he little knew how the treacherous stimulant was gradually undermining and sapping the little physical strength he had. Delicate as he was, he could not afford to lose or lessen one chance of physical invigoration. The strain upon him was intense. Lose his position he would not, cost what it might; so day by day he braced himself up to fresh exertion, and drew so largely upon his stock of vital energy that it was rapidly becoming exhausted. He knew nothing of this; absorbed in study, and worried by the monetary difficulties in which he was daily becoming more deeply involved, he took little heed of his failing strength.

After scattering the fragments of the letter, he sauntered along the river-side to a favourite haunt of his in a nut-copse. Here, lying on the fragrant earth, looking up through the trembling leaves to the deep blue of the summer sky, he tried

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to face and overcome the difficulty. To many boys it would have been of small importance. A bill which he could not pay! What of it? Ah, yes! but the consequences of not paying! what of them?

That Mr. Harley would fulfil his threat he had no doubt. The Doctor would not let such a matter rest unsettled. A heavy bill for spirits was quite a different affair from a harmless, though insolent boyish prank. Among the boarders a running account was a forbidden thing. Ready money was the law of the school, any breach of which had been more than once followed by severe punishment; even when the items read as follows:—

'Ginger beer.
Burnt almonds.
Ices and buns.
Burnt almonds.
Jam tarts.
Burnt almonds,' etc.

There had been a laugh at the expense of the almond-lover's impecuniosity; but Ross shivered as he remembered the Doctor's stern reprimand.

Of course, in one sense, he was beyond the Doctor's jurisdiction, being a day scholar; but the public exposure and disgrace would fall far more heavily on him than on the others, and he knew it. For them there would be the inevitable punishment, which he would escape; but for him would be the astonished surprise, the bitter disappointment of those whose good opinion he valued almost as much as life itself. He dared not think of it, but turned his thoughts resolutely to search for a way of escape. The letter he had just destroyed was from his cousin, Edward Fairfax, a good-natured, generous young officer, who, during a visit to Northland, had taken a great fancy to him, and had told him to write to him if at any time he got into any scrape. Not that he had considered such an event probable. Of all the boys, languid, aristocratic Ross was apparently the least likely to fall into the ordinary schoolboy troubles.

Ross had applied to him; with what result has been seen. Very bitter were his thoughts as he lay in the pleasant sunlit copse that summer afternoon. The brightness had vanished

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from his sunshine, and the beauty from his world. Restless, dissatisfied, with an intolerable weight on heart and head, he wondered if life were always to be such a burden, and if so, how he was to bear it. And then, after wandering into the future, he would come back with a painful start to the question, 'What am I to do?'

There seemed but one course open to him—that of telling his mother and enlisting her sympathy and aid. He could do it, he knew. She would listen, and shed some tears, no doubt; but she would help him. He had almost driven himself to resolution, when suddenly came a thought, like a flash of light in the darkness, revealing an avenue of escape.

Years ago an old maiden aunt had died, leaving a few precious antique pieces of plate as a legacy to her various nephews and nieces. To Ross had fallen the lion's share in size and value: a huge, old-fashioned, massive pair of silver candlesticks. What was to hinder him from taking them from their dusty hiding-place in his mother's storeroom and pawning them, instead of burdening his mother with the sorrowful knowledge of his careless extravagance?

He sprang to his feet, flushed with hope and relief. It did not take him long to go home, for the clocks were striking five, and he began to feel hungry. As he expected, only his mother was at home. All the rest were out to tea. He too had been invited, but had declined, though it was to Mr. Crawford's they were asked.

All tea-time he was trying to devise some way of getting his mother out of the house, but was spared all further trouble when, toward the close, she said she was going to see Mrs. Harborough.

'Mona tells me poor little Cecile has not been well for some time. I am afraid she is not likely to get better unless some change takes place in her father, or she is sent away. I wonder if Mrs. Harborough would let them come with us to the sea-side next month. Ross, would you like me to ask her?'

'I should very much, mamma. It is just like you to think of it,' said Ross, kissing the gentle face with a pang of remorse as he thought of his course of deception. He was unusually loving and thoughtful that evening, and Mrs. Norman's heart

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overflowed with thankfulness for her precious boys, and especially this most precious one, as he took her to the Cedars, and left her at the door, turning away with that rare, sweet smile on his face, which she loved so well.

Opening into Mrs. Norman's bedroom was a long narrow closet, filled with shelves and cupboards, in which was kept the household rubbish, according to the boys; the household treasure according to the feminine mind. Such hoards of bygone finery, such odds and ends of curious old-fashioned treasury, such relics of ancient grandeur as delighted Maggie, and were carefully guarded by her mother. Right at the far back, in the darkest corner of a dark cupboard, stood the silver candlesticks, waiting till Ross were old enough to declare his pleasure concerning them. There they had stood for years, and but for this emergency there they might have stood for years more.

With a guilty, saddening sense of degradation, Ross took them out, and stole on noiseless step to his own room. He had committed no crime; it was his own property! And yet his face burned, and his hands shook with shame. Locking his door, he sank into a chair and dropped his head upon his hands. A great wave of emotion swept over him, and hot, burning tears rose to his aching eyes. For the first time in his life he experienced the intense mental torture of a bitter self-contempt.

But though the storm swept over him, no trace of it appeared on his face when he met Frank at the barn. With well-assumed indifference he discussed the value of the silver, and made arrangements respecting the delivery of the cash obtained for it.

Frank suspected nothing of the inward fever and disquietude beneath the calm exterior.

Mother Balls made no objection to the candlesticks. Already in imagination she saw them melting down to shapeless metal, the too common fate of such pledges when unredeemed. It was rather a good stroke of business for her, and one over which she and her partner chuckled with cunning delight. It was not often a schoolboy pledged such convenient treasure.

On Monday morning Ross received a little packet, containing coin of the realm to the amount of five pounds, four of

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which were immediately transferred to Frank. In the course of the day the solitary sovereign found its way into other hands, and Ross was penniless and free from debt!

With a lightened heart he walked home from school, feeling as if life could be bearable after all. One of the schoolboys, Tom Longman, ran after him and put his hand on his shoulder. He was a general favourite, a happy, good-tempered boy, always willing to take or give a joke, and never known to lose his temper. Ross liked him, and was a more frequent visitor at his house than at any other.

'Will you come up to supper to-night, Ross? A lot of them are coming, and we are going to do the gay and festive in honour of my birthday. It is quite an *impromptu* affair: never thought of it till this morning! Didn't know it was time for a birthday! It's my belief I have two a year at the least: they are always popping up. It's the mater's fault: she counts up and tells me when one is close. You will come, won't you?'

'Who are coming?'

'Aubrey, Price, Nelson, Jack—oh, and a lot of them!'

Ross hesitated; he felt very much inclined to go, but had been making good resolutions, and feared temptation.

'I'd come willingly, Longman,' he said frankly, after a pause; 'but the fact is, we always play at your house, and I can't afford it just now. I've had some heavy bills,—heavy for me, I mean,—and they have cleared me out.'

'That doesn't matter! you are not bound to play with money in your pocket. You can pay any time, if you happen to be unlucky and lose.'

'That is just what I cannot do. I have overrun my allowance several times lately, and I do not think it is an honourable thing to do, Longman,' replied Ross, determined to carry it out now it was fairly begun. 'It is all very well for fellows with plenty of money, but *we* are obliged to make things fit, and sometimes it requires a little contrivance.'

There was a slight ring of annoyance in his tone, which was not lost on Tom. He had never liked or respected Ross Norman so much as at that moment.

'All right, old fellow,' he said heartily. 'If you'll promise to come I'll promise that you shall not lose one farthing.'

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'How can you manage it?' asked Ross, his face shading.

'By having no play for money at all. I don't care for it much myself, though it does give an interest to the game. You come, and I'll settle that easily.'

'Very well,' was the reply; and Ross walked on, with a very comfortable feeling of having performed satisfactorily an act of moral heroism. His resolutions were bearing fruit, and his confidence in himself began to revive.

The day for the distribution of the prizes was near at hand, and such as had the prospect of distinguishing themselves were hard at work. Ross knew that he ought not to spare the time, as he had wasted so many hours lately; but, confident in his own powers, he resolved to push the work of three hours into one before he went to Longman's. As he entered the gate he saw Briggs, the dismissed gardener, coming from the servants' entrance, and stopped to speak to him.

'Have you got any work yet, Briggs?'

'No, sir. I've been thinking perhaps Mr. Harborough would take me; he must want another gardener besides Mays, I should think—all that ground.'

'Go and ask him. You won't be dismissed from there on account of teetotal fancies, so perhaps you may suit,' said Ross sarcastically.

Briggs laughed. 'I'll try, at any rate.'

Hurrying over tea, Ross ran up-stairs to his own room, and settled down for a good hour's close work. But his brain was already fatigued, and before long he was obliged to have recourse to his accustomed aid. After a glass of his favourite cherry brandy he worked well, and his spirits rose. He felt almost inclined to give up the supper and remain on at his work; he was just in the vein, and thoughts flowed readily. But he was tired, and needed relaxation, and the evening held out strong inducement. He cleared away his books and went.

It was a large party; quite large enough for antagonistic spirits to avoid each other. He was glad of this when he espied Parker's unpleasant, untrustworthy face among the loungers round the billiard-table.

Mrs. Longman, a confirmed invalid, left the boys to themselves. She was a widow with plenty of money, and three extravagant sons. The two elder were in the army, sowing

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the traditional wild oats with hitherto unfailing industry. Tom, the youngest, would have been spoilt years ago if unlimited indulgence could have accomplished that end. Fortunately for him, he was possessed of one of those rare and happy dispositions which no amount of spoiling can ever spoil!

He loved his mother, and obeyed her whenever she thought fit to lay any command upon him, which was seldom. In her eyes he was perfect: then what need for her to interfere? This view of the case suiting them both, they lived very happily and harmoniously in their luxurious home, and never came in collision.

Tom Longman's suppers were famous among the boys of Eastdale. Unlimited supplies of all Eastdale procurable dainties and plenty of good wine made their success *un fait accompli*, and few indeed were the rejected invitations.

Tom did not mix his parties much; he had two sets, and kept them apart. Occasionally the Levites and their fraternity met,—the fraternity being such as were admitted to their society without actually being members thereof. Pleasant parties they were, with enough real sparkling wit and genuine fun to last three of the opposition. There is no human being more capable of thorough enjoyment than a pure-minded, high-principled, clear-conscienced English boy. There are no dregs in his cup.

On the present occasion it is to be feared the guests found a great many dregs,—most of them at least. Sunny Jack forgot his troubles and went in for pleasure with a zest; his conscience had not much to burden it. But most of the others were accustomed to little private transactions which would not bear much inspection. Any acute observer might have discovered this for himself. There were various covert remarks and slang allusions which told their own tale of broken rules and questionable escapades.

Tom's billiard-table, a birthday present, was the centre of attraction, and invited criticism. Parker was loudest in free remark.

'It's a very decent affair, but not up to mine,' he said, with the evident intention of being overheard by the owner. 'Mine is a foot longer at the least, and a better make.'

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Tom coloured, but held his tongue; he was a gentleman, and would not quarrel with one of his own guests.

'And yet,' said Ross quietly, but with a curl of the lips, 'this has one advantage over yours.'

'And what is that, pray?' demanded Parker superciliously.

'It is the property of'— Ross paused; he was going to say of a gentleman, but his better nature and in-bred good taste prevailed—'of Tom Longman,' he added, with a slight smile.

Parker stared, confused; the half-suppressed laugh from several of the bystanders told him that some under-current of meaning, could he but see it, demanded instant resentment; but for the life of him he could see nothing in the simple words—rather silly words they seemed to him—to resent.

'Do you mean to insult me?' he said fiercely.

'Certainly not! It is the very thing I endeavoured to avoid,' was the cool reply. And again the boys laughed. Parker would have given much to see the point of the joke; he felt his dignity at stake. As is generally the case with the owners of dignity so infinitesimal as to be invisible except to the microscopic eye turned inward, he had a particular regard for the hypothetical possession.

'He only means that, being mine, it has the advantage of being available this evening,' said Tom, stifling a laugh, and giving Jack a sly kick under the table. 'Put your insulted dignity in your pocket, Parker, and come to supper.'

With a look of malignant hatred at indifferent Ross, who was sauntering out of the billiard-room with his hands in his pocket, Parker sullenly followed.

The fun raged fast and furious. Ross was at his best; the *rencontre* with Parker, whom he cordially detested and despised, had put him on his mettle.

The conversation turned on school topics, and the chances of prizes were discussed eagerly.

'Ross Norman will take the essay prize, of course,' said Aubrey, in a tone implying *cela va sans dire.*

There was a lull at that moment, and Parker's sneering voice was audible to all.

'I bet ten to one he does not.'

'Done,' cried Aubrey, clapping him on the shoulder.

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'That will be the easiest ten shillings I ever earned by honest toil.'

'It will be the easiest *one* I ever pocketed,' retorted Parker. 'Ross Norman won't take the essay prize.'

'Who will, then?' scoffed Aubrey, while the others listened for the reply.

'Crawford. If you don't believe it, ask Jack Norman; he is my authority,' said Parker, with a look of evil triumph on his flushed face.

Jack sprang to his feet, his eyes flashing with indignation.

'That is a lie! I never spoke to you on the subject in my life.'

'Nevertheless, you did to Aleck; and if you choose to discuss private affairs in public, it is your own look-out if they become public property.'

Jack grew scarlet with intense wrath and vexation. 'So you were behind the wall listening, were you?' he said, with withering sarcasm. 'Eavesdropping is among your numerous accomplishments, then? We are in select company, truly!'

'There is a seat both sides of the wall, and I was sitting there long before you came up. I am no more an eavesdropper than you, Jack Norman,' answered Parker threateningly. He did not care to win the reputation so hated by schoolboys, that of a listener.

'Did you say it, Jack? that is the point,' put in Aubrey, with the best possible intention, but blundering as usual.

Jack hesitated painfully. 'No,' he said at last; 'I did not. But I did say what clever heads, accustomed to such work, could twist into something very like it. I told Aleck that I had heard Crawford's chance was as good as Ross's. I did not say it was so.'

'Arthur Winslow told you,' put in Parker vindictively; 'he had it from his father, of course. Now, was I not right?' He looked round the table, but saw no sympathetic face. One and all, they condemned the miserable spite which had led to such gross violation of honour.

'I think it would have been as well if you had kept the information to yourself,' said Tom coldly.

A cloud had fallen on the party, which no effort could raise. Intensely annoyed at the effect on himself, Ross did his

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utmost to cast off the weight which was crushing all spirit out of him. He knew that of late months his school-work had fallen below the average—*his* former average, but he had no idea whatever that it had been noticed at headquarters. He thought himself still sufficiently in advance of the school to maintain his hitherto undisputed position. The knowledge that a rival was not only possible, but already discussed as an existing fact, came upon him with all the force of a sudden shock, and for the time crushed all heart out of him.

Knowing by experience the effect of stimulants upon his excitable brain, he drank freely, and recovered some measure of gaiety. That it was to some extent forced, those who knew him best could see, and Jack grew anxious. More than once he hinted that it was time to go, but Ross refused the hint. Parker looked on with a wicked, gratified smile. He would have liked nothing better than to carry the news to Dr. Winslow that his favourite scholar was lying intoxicated under Tom Longman's billiard-table. Fortunately that gratification could not be his. Ross refused to play; his hand was too unsteady. Tom declined to bring out the cards, fearing the result in such tempestuous atmosphere.

At last the party broke up, and the boarders went home, having stayed till the last allowed minute. A few of the rest stopped behind for a short time, and then left in a body. As they stepped out into the cool night air, Ross turned faint and stumbled. He would have fallen if Tom had not seized his arm.

Hearing his exclamation, Jack turned round, and, seeing Ross leaning against one of the pillars of the porch, sprang to his side, alarmed.

'What's the matter, Ross? Are you ill?'

'Ill!' echoed Parker derisively; 'he's drunk!'

Raising his arm, Jack turned suddenly and fetched him a swinging blow on the side of the face, which made him stagger. So sharp and unexpected was it, that he seemed for a minute to lose all sense. Recovering himself, he dashed forward with an oath, his face white with concentrated rage. Quick as thought Jack ducked, and Parker measured his length on the ground. A laugh from the Dangerfields, between whom and himself was an established rivalry, com-

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pleted his discomfiture. Almost choking with suppressed laughter, Tom helped him up, and brushed the gravel off his coat. He had fallen heavily on his hands, and they were bruised and slightly cut.

'You shall pay for this, Norman,' he said slowly, wiping the blood from a scratch on his wrist.

'With pleasure! how much?' replied Jack contemptuously. 'Half-a-crown will cover all damages, I suppose?'

'And you shall pay for that, too,' answered Parker, turning sullenly away. They watched him down the drive, then Ross took Jack's friendly arm and went home.

Northland was within five minutes' walk, and neither spoke till they were at the gate.

'Wait a moment, Jack,' said Ross hurriedly. 'Tell me what Arthur said.'

'I wish Parker were at the bottom of the sea,' said Jack, fuming and raging inwardly. 'Of course, I shall tell you now, though I did not intend to mention it. It was just this, Ross: I was talking to Arthur about the essay prize, and said innocently enough that all the school looked upon it as yours already, and he said he had thought so too, but when he spoke to his father about it, he said it was by no means certain.'

'Well?'

'And he said Crawford was improving in every respect, and that some of his compositions showed great brilliancy, and almost genius,' went on Jack reluctantly; 'but that yours had fallen off lately, and he feared you were anything but well. He put it down to your health entirely, Ross, so there is nothing to be really vexed about. No fellow can help being ill.'

'It will be all over the school to-morrow,' groaned poor Ross. 'A pleasant prospect for me!'

'What does it matter if it doesn't come true? Don't make yourself ill over it, Ross, it isn't worth that; but I'll back you against Crawford any day, if you only do your best. As for Parker, I wish he were out of the town altogether. Mean beggar! I can't think what such fellows are born for.'

With a heavy heart Ross threw himself on his bed that night. The day which had commenced so brightly had ended

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in clouds and gloom, and he looked forward to the morrow with dread. One thing he decided, to strain every nerve to win the essay prize. It should be through no want of effort on his part if Crawford took it.

The next day Parker made his appearance at school with a black eye. Dr. Winslow looked at him with marked displeasure.

'What is the matter with your face?' he asked after school. 'You have been fighting, I suppose.'

'No, sir,' was the smooth reply; '*I* have not been fighting. I had the misfortune to offend Jack Norman, and he gave me this mark of his regard.'

'Which you promptly returned, no doubt,' said the Doctor sarcastically.

'Excuse me, sir, I am not in the habit of striking boys smaller and weaker than myself,' replied Parker loftily, congratulating himself that circumstances had prevented him from returning Jack's blow, and so enabled him to give utterance to the noble and manly sentiment. The Doctor smiled, and walked on. He went through the playground, stopping now and then to speak to the boys. At the further end Jack stood leaning against a tree.

'So you have been giving Parker a black eye?' said the Doctor.

Jack fired up. 'He insulted Ross, sir.'

'And could not Ross take care of his own dignity? I thought you and Parker were great friends.'

'Friends! I—Parker!' stammered indignant Jack. 'I am sorry you have such an opinion of *me*, sir.'

'But you have been in his company a good deal lately.'

'I was in it last night, I know. Not from choice. Longman asked him. I meet him there, but nowhere else.'

The Doctor looked puzzled. 'I understood you were frequently together. How could such a mistake arise?'

'Somebody has been telling lies! Parker is no friend of mine, sir,' cried Jack hotly.

The Doctor looked at him with searching eyes. 'Were you not with him at a supper on the rocks some few nights ago?'

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Jack opened his eyes wide. 'I haven't had supper on the rocks this year. Who has been telling tales about me, sir?'

'Jack, I have heard many things about you lately that I wish were not true.'

'Perhaps they aren't,' grumbled Jack, yet feeling guilty as he remembered Hickory.

'I do not wish to force your confidence, my boy,' continued the Doctor kindly; 'I never do that with my own sons. But I knew your father, and for his sake, as well as your own, I wish to be a friend to you as well as a master. It is so easy to take the first wrong step, and, alas! so hard to retrace it. I told you I had heard many things about you, but you know I never act on second-hand information unless forced. If rules are broken, I prefer a manly confession to all other methods of discovering the truth. What I have heard does not influence my conduct, but it must necessarily influence my opinion. I cannot help that, Jack.'

'No, sir,' said Jack, wishing Hickory had been in Van Dieman's Land before he had ever darkened his door. 'Aleck told you—I mean that I am not going again, sir. I know it isn't the right sort of place.'

'What is not?'

'Hickory's,' replied Jack, surprised at the question; 'you mean Hickory's, don't you?'

'I never knew you went there,' said the Doctor, looking very grave and disturbed. 'This is the first I have heard of it.'

Jack stared in great perplexity. 'Then I don't know what you have been talking about, sir,' he said candidly. 'I went to Hickory's with—some of the fellows, and I thought you'd heard of that.'

'No; what I heard was that you were frequently with Parker, at one place and another, and that you gambled. Is it not true?'

'Certainly not, sir. I wish I knew who had told you!'

'Never mind that. I am glad it is not true. But what did you go to Hickory's for?'

'I went because others did; just for fun, sir.'

The Doctor's face relaxed. 'I am afraid fun has something to answer for, Jack. Don't let it take you too far.'

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He nodded pleasantly as he walked away. Jack flung his cap in the air with a suppressed hurrah, and set off for home.

'What *is* the matter?' said Maggie, as he burst into the dining-room, where she was sitting alone. 'You look as if something had happened.'

'So it has. I say, Maggie, it is all a mistake, the picnic and everything!' he cried, turning a somersault over the head of the couch. 'I've had it out with the Doctor, and somebody's been telling a lot of lies about me. That's why he thought I had to do with that Thursday night affair when Dalglish saw them climbing in the window. Hurrah!'

'Then it was Ross,' cried Maggie suddenly, with the air and tone of one who had made a startling discovery.

'What was Ross?' demanded Jack, sitting up and staring at her.

'Who was there—wherever it was. I saw him! I thought it was you at first,' said Maggie, greatly excited. 'I never thought of it before. It was Ross!'

'Do be still, you little stupid! Tell me what you mean?' said Jack, seizing her by the arm.

'That Thursday night when you said they were rats,' replied Miss Maggie, not very coherently. 'Jane told me a white owl flew past the window early every morning, and I woke and went to the window to see. He was under the lime, and I thought it was you; but I listened and heard him come up-stairs, and then that plank creaked, and I knew he had gone into Ross's room. It was Ross who went, and the Doctor thought it was you. Shall you tell him?'

'Who? the Doctor? Of course not, you little idiot! Now mind you hold your tongue; it is no business of yours if Ross were out. You'll get in no end of trouble if you don't look out.'

'Where did he go?' interrupted Maggie.

'That is his business. Now mind, Maggie, if you breathe one syllable to any one, I'll tell all the boys what a tomboy you are! I will, as sure as my name is Jack Norman.'

Maggie shook her head defiantly, but made no reply.

After parting from Jack, Dr. Winslow, with a puzzled expression, went back through the playground. Price was

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sitting by himself on the wall, and raised his hat as he passed. The Doctor paused.

'When you told me your share in that escapade, Price, you said Norman was there.'

'I know, sir. His name slipped out by accident; I did not mean to tell. I'm not such a cad as that!'

'But was he there, Price?'

'Of course he was, sir. I wish I'd bitten my tongue off, though, before I'd told you,' returned Price, with genuine annoyance and mortification. 'You put us on our honour to tell, and I meant to tell my own share and no one's else.'

'I know; I shall not betray confidence. Are you sure he was there?'

'Certain, positive, sir; he got into a row with Parker. Oh, confound my unlucky tongue!'

The Doctor could not forbear a smile. 'Never mind; I shall make no use of it.'

He went on, feeling unusually perplexed and troubled. That Price could have referred to either Aleck or Ross never once entered his head. They were both great favourites of his, and he had almost unlimited confidence in their honour. Of the supper-party on the rocks he had heard from two sources. Price had acknowledged his share, and inadvertently had betrayed Norman—Ross, not Jack, of course; and one of the gardeners, going to his home late, had overheard the quarrel between Parker and Frank, and partly out of an ill-natured spite had told what he had seen and heard. He, too, had said Norman, without specifying which, and the Doctor had dismissed him without asking a single question. He disliked exceedingly the least approach to tale-bearing, and gave it no encouragement.

What to make of the two apparently contradictory accounts he did not know. That Price was speaking the truth he could not doubt; that Jack was telling a lie he could not believe.

'I will speak to him again; I will tell him that I would far rather he spoke the truth,' he thought, with a sigh. 'I cannot let the boy go.'

He recalled Jack's honest face, and recoiled from the

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thought of a deliberate falsehood with absolute pain. And yet what was he to think?

Little dreaming what was in store for him, Jack went to school with a light heart. His spirits were in a state of perpetual fiz, according to the frequent complaints of his neighbours.

'I believe you are off your head!' said Aubrey crossly. 'I hate to see a fellow so horridly jolly when everything is going wrong.'

Aubrey was realizing the inevitable loss of a coveted prize, and his temper was suffering in consequence.

'Jack, my father wants you,' said Arthur, passing him at the close of school. 'He is in the class-room.'

Taking sundry flying leaps over the desks, Jack arrived at the door, and, having toned himself down into becoming respectfulness of demeanour, went in.

The Doctor was alone, seated at his desk. At the boy's entrance he looked up, and scanned him with a gaze so searching, it seemed as if he would read his very thoughts.

'I have sent for you, Jack, because I want you to help me to clear up a mystery. Some one, who was on the hills one Thursday night, tells me positively that he saw you there in company with Parker and others. You deny it, so how am I to account for the contradiction?'

An indignant denial rose to Jack's lips, but never crossed them. His heart seemed to stop beating for a moment, and then went on with heavy throbs as the hot blood rushed through his veins and dyed his face. Maggie's words were ringing in his ears: 'It was Ross, and the Doctor thinks it was you.' And as their truth, with all it involved, forced itself upon his mind, he stood speechless. How could he speak, when to defend himself would be to betray Ross?

In an agony of doubt, misery, and indecision, he stood gazing blankly out of the window. He saw himself cleared, and Ross—proud, sensitive, clever Ross—denounced as a liar and breaker of rules. How could he bear it? It would crush him to the earth!

In the confusion and rush of thought he took an exaggerated view of the consequences. In the first place, the Doctor would not have denounced Ross at all. Neither was Ross a

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liar to be denounced. On the afternoon when the school was questioned, he had remained at home. But there was enough without that,—enough in the Doctor's disappointment and disapproval to crush such a nature as Ross Norman's,—and Jack knew it. He had seen the intense mortification consequent on the knowledge that the Doctor was disappointed in his intellectual progress; but that that mortification would deepen into an agony of shame if his honour and truth were touched, Jack knew only too well.

'Have you no solution to offer?' asked the Doctor, feeling a shock of disappointment and pain.

'I—I—indeed'—gasped Jack, and then stopped.

To deny it was equivalent to betraying Ross, for of course the Doctor would question his informant, and learn the truth, and it would all come out.

'Have you nothing to say?'

What could he say that would not touch Ross? In vain he seized one thought, and then another, only to abandon each in turn.

'You understand the only construction that can be placed on your silence, Jack?' said the Doctor, with a sigh. 'I cannot tell you my disappointment in you. Why did you not speak out this morning when I gave you the chance? It would have been easy then. Have you nothing to say now?'

No; he had nothing to say, as he stood there with the colour fading from his face, and his heart sinking within him.

'Then you may go.'

Mechanically he turned and left the room. Some of the boys called him to join their game as he passed through the playground; but without a word he went on, feeling as if he should never care to play again. To avoid company he took a roundabout way home, and ran up to his own room. Locking the door, he threw himself on his bed, and, brave, manly boy as he was, burst into tears.

Presently Maggie came hammering at the door for him to go down to tea.

'Don't want any,' he said gruffly, feeling as if he would like to shake her in his wrath. If she had held her unlucky tongue he would never have known anything about Ross.

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Then his mother came up to see what was the matter; and he was obliged to open the door, and feign a headache.

But he could not deceive her quick eyes, which detected the trace of tears.

'You are in some trouble, Jack; you are not afraid to tell your mother?' she said anxiously.

'No; but it's only a bit of a row, and it can't be helped,' he replied, with a gulp. 'Go down, mamma, and don't worry yourself or anybody else about it. It will come right.'

She kissed him and went, feeling it very hard that her boy should be in trouble and she not able to help him.

Instead of going to bed at the usual time, Ross made preparations for work. He closed the shutters, locked the door, and then opened his private cupboard.

'We will see who wins the prize,' he murmured, with a flash of almost defiant excitement. 'I have had warning, and it is war to the death now, Crawford.'

He settled down under the shaded gaslight, and was soon absorbed in study. The little clock ticked away the quickly passing minutes, and every quarter warned him that the night was going. From time to time he turned with aching eyes from the page before him, and drank with feverish lips the stimulating contents of the glass beside him. Then with renewed energy he returned and lost himself again.

And so it went on till the clock struck one, when, wearied out, and shivering in every limb, he threw himself upon the bed and slept.

No wonder that he awoke with a heavy, aching head, and general feeling of lassitude. It was a trouble even to dress, and the day before him looked formidable in its length and work.

How was he to get through it?

With languid step he sauntered down the road and through the town. At the door of the confectioner's shop he paused irresolutely.

'I am fit for nothing,' he thought. 'I must have something to pick me up, or I shall never get through the morning.'

He felt an irresistible craving for something to stay the gnawing within, and brace up his nervous system.

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The girl behind the counter smiled as he entered.

'You have come for your morning dose, sir,' she said pleasantly. The tradespeople liked Ross Norman. Indeed, all the boys were favourites in the town. But they were proud of Ross, for whom a brilliant future was predicted.

'You must put it down; I have no change,' he said listlessly.

It was against the rules of the establishment to trust any of the schoolboys; but this was exceptional. Ross was a Norman as well as a schoolboy. In the former character he was outside the rule.

He took the glass of cherry brandy and drained it at one draught. It put new life into him, and brought faint colour to his pale cheeks. But his haggard looks attracted the attention of more than one that morning. Dr. Winslow warned him against overwork, and noted the eager, feverish look in the usually calm eyes.

'That boy will kill himself if he does not take care; I must speak to his mother,' he said to his son Arthur. 'He is burning away.'

'The holidays are nearly here, papa. Ross will not knock off work till after distribution day. I am very sorry, but I have been making mischief, I am afraid,' said Arthur regretfully.

'That is something new,' replied his father, with a smile.

There was perfect understanding between him and this eldest son of his.

He listened to the history of Parker's treachery without remark.

'Isn't he a cad?' said Arthur contemptuously, as he wound up his recital. 'I am more than vexed, papa; it has done Ross harm, I know. Jack is in a nice rage.'

'I wish Parker were out of the neighbourhood for more reasons than one,' returned the Doctor thoughtfully. 'He does Jack no good.'

'Oh, he does Jack no harm!' replied Arthur lightly.

Dr. Winslow did speak to Mrs. Norman, but to no purpose. In vain she pleaded with Ross to give up all thought of the prizes and take the needed rest. He turned a deaf ear, or at least an unheeding one.

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'I am all right,' was his constant reply, impatient of the interruption. 'What a fuss about nothing, mamma. Do let a fellow work if he likes.'

So she was obliged to console herself with the thought that it would soon be over.

As the time drew nearer, Ross grew tremblingly anxious. Not one effort was relaxed. Night after night he sat up till past midnight, poring over his books, and keeping up a fictitious strength by means of powerful stimulants. Again and again his secret store was replenished; every farthing of his allowance finding its way into Mr. Harley's till, or into the hands of Mrs. Wait the confectioner, for he found he could not get through the morning without his usual dose.

The day arrived at last. It was a sort of gala day at Eastdale. Not only the parents of the boys, but the principal people in the neighbourhood, attended to see the distribution of prizes, and hear the address, which was usually given by some county magnate.

Seated between her mother and Mona, Maggie watched the inflowing tide of visitors. When the boys filed in and took their places, her excitement knew no bounds. In vain she tried to attract her brothers' attention. They were far too much occupied to think of her.

Ross sat in a sort of stupor. The hum of voice around him fell meaningless on his ear, and, though apparently he was watching the gay throng before him, he saw nothing.

Lord Willeston Forsyth delivered the address. At the lull preceding it Ross started and looked round, but as the quiet, measured tones of the grey-haired statesman fell upon his ear he sank back into apathy.

Not one word of the address did he hear. He was recalled to himself by vigorous cheering and stamping around him, and by Aubrey pinching him over his neighbour's shoulder.

'Norman! Ross Norman!'

He heard his name from some far-off distance, and was hustled to his feet by enthusiastic hands. Which way to turn he had no idea. There seemed to be no avenue of escape from the crowd of legs and heads around him.

Some one took his arm and guided him to the open aisle up the centre of the room, and then mechanically he

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walked forward and received something. He knew not what.

Making a violent effort, he sufficiently realized his position to bow, and then, amid the cheers of the school, returned to his place with the hardly-won essay prize in his hand.

'Hurrah! a thousand congratulations, old fellow,' said Crawford, almost shaking his hand off. 'Three cheers for Ross Norman!'

It was taken up instantly, for cheering was permitted. And no one clapped and stamped more vigorously than Richard Crawford. Maggie went wild, of course.

Aleck took off full his share of honours, and Jack was not far behind; but he felt little pleasure in his prizes, and passed them round without one throb of pride.

When Parker's name was called out, not one single cheer greeted it. As he walked up in silence, his lips curled with an attempt at scorn; one pitying voice essayed a feeble cheer, but was instantly checked.

'It is too bad,' whispered good-natured Aubrey; but he made no attempt to better it.

At last came the great event of the day. There was an interval of ten minutes, and the Doctor sent for Ross to come into the dining-room.

'You must have some refreshment, my dear boy,' he said, more gently than he was wont to speak. 'Can you go through with it? Are you well enough?'

Ross's eyes wandered to the table.

'I can do it, sir, if you will give me a drop of brandy,' he said, with painful effort.

The Doctor touched his hand and then his head.

'How hot you are. Are you well?'

'Quite well,' was the feverish reply. 'It is only the strain on the nerves—the excitement. I am quite well.'

'I am afraid you are far from that,' said the Doctor, looking with kindly, anxious eyes at the haggard young face. 'I do not like to disappoint you, Ross, but I do not feel at all comfortable in letting you go back.'

'Indeed, I am quite well,' said Ross sharply.

The Doctor looked surprised; at another time he would have felt displeased. It was not often Ross Norman forgot his respect.

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'Well, you must see what you can do. I do not like you to have brandy; will you have a glass of wine?'

Ross drank it eagerly, and returned to the schoolroom. Presently the Doctor re-entered with Lord Willeston, and took his place. There was a buzz of expectancy, and with his brain in a whirl Ross walked up to the dais. Everybody bent forward to see the hero of the day—the talented boy whose Latin verses were so full of promise for the future, bidding fair to rival the highest excellence the Universities could boast—a classical scholar of a brilliance beyond his years—a poet of rare and exceeding beauty.

Every voice was hushed, and many a heart beat quick with sympathy as he stood before them in silent waiting. He caught his mother's eye, and smiled—that rare, sweet smile! His thin, refined face was flushed, and his dark eyes burning with the glow of excitement. Never had he looked so beautiful, and more than one heart sadly foretold for him a brief career.

Dizzy and faint with exultation, he strove to still the trembling of his lips. It was his hour of triumph, and for a few minutes the words flowed readily—the proud words of his old-world hero. As the smooth lines rolled from his lips he heard again the sound that had bewildered him before,—a curious singing by his side. He stopped, and then went on. A few more lines, and then another longer pause. The silence was awful! He stretched out his hand in helpless groping. It was all dark! dark!

'Ross!'

He heard a voice from out the darkness and horrible stillness, and then he laughed and fell.

They took him home, and Dr. Burton left his place among the visitors and went with him. Before night Ross was raving in the delirium of brain fever.

For weeks he hovered between life and death. Night and day the anxious watchers never left his side, fearing that every hour would be his last. He had no strength to battle with disease; every vital power was at its lowest ebb.

Now Jack felt doubly glad that no word of his had hastened such an end. As he sat beside the bed, and listened to the incoherent ravings which told of the unseated reason, he

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dropped his head and prayed that he alone might bear the stigma and dishonour. Living or dead, *his* name should be unstained.

The more he thought about it, the more he was puzzled. If Ross had joined some clandestine party and helped to break the rules, he surely need not have made bad worse by denying it all—it was so unlike him. It was characteristic of a Norman to scorn prevarication and deceit, and that Ross should stoop to falsehood was well-nigh incredible. He grew hot at the very thought.

Certain half-sentences, too, which dropped from his brother's burning lips, made him feel uncomfortable; he hardly knew why.

'He shall never know! It will kill— I cannot bear the'—

Though he listened eagerly, he could make no sense out of the disconnected sentences. Sometimes Ross would start up and entreat them to give him one glass more!—just one glass! And then he would moan piteously and declare that they were all against him, and he should fail and bring disgrace upon them.

This, of course, they thought referred to the prizes, and Mrs. Norman wept as she imagined all her boy had gone through and suffered.

At one time the doctor himself gave up all hope of saving the young life which had been so full of promise. Two or three times a day he came and stood beside the bed, noting each change with saddened eyes. He would have given much to wrest this one life from Death's relentless hands; for he loved it. Childless in his old age, there were times when he coveted his old friend's clever, handsome boys; and Ross, with his grave, sweet face, and brilliant talent, had won his pride as well as love.

He did his utmost; he could do no more.

'What have we all been thinking of?' he said. 'Strange that not one of all of us could see that he was burning his life away! What are all the prizes—all the honours in the world compared with life? He ought to have been out on the hills and moors all day—not shut up in a stifling schoolroom.'

But this time it was not to be; life conquered, and once

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more the familiar smile of recognition on the loved face thrilled the mother's heart with joy.

There was great rejoicing when the tidings that the crisis was safely passed was made known in the town.

Mrs. Norman went about the house in a state of ecstatic happiness. Aleck locked himself in his own room, and Jack rushed out into a secluded nook in the garden, and throwing himself upon the ground bedewed the grass with a few tears of joy and thankfulness, of which he was, nevertheless, much ashamed. Maggie took the news coolly; it took a great deal to disturb that young lady's equanimity.

'Well,' she said, 'I never thought he wouldn't get better. It's only the good boys who die, and I don't call Ross very good.'

For which unsisterly speech Mona, between her tears, gave her a lecture, and told her severely that she did not deserve such good, clever brothers.

'Oh, they're all very well! but I like your brother quite as much,' replied Miss Maggie indifferently; which was not true, for in her heart she thought there were no brothers in the world like 'our boys.'

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CHAPTER IV.

DR. BURTON'S ADVICE.

MRS. HARBOROUGH, Clarice, and Cecil became frequent visitors at Northland during Ross's convalescence. Everything possible was done to relieve the tedium of the weary hours; but the time passed very slowly to the impatient boy. The holidays were over, and the school had again assembled long before he left his room. It was misery to him to see the boys start off with their books, and to hear the familiar schoolboy gossip.

He had a great deal of company. Mona's pretty face was always a welcome sight, and many a game of chess she won with proud delight. She always laughed at her defeated foe; but he did not mind being laughed at by her, though to be beaten by a girl was rather ignominious, certainly.

The schoolboys came up frequently; too often to please Mrs. Norman. But he liked to see them, so she always made them welcome. Frank came occasionally, and quite altered her opinion of the town boys.

'If they are all like that pleasant, good-natured friend of yours, they are very different from what I have always imagined,' she said; and Ross felt pleased for his friend's sake.

'Oh, but they are not!' he replied, laughing. 'Frank is a *rara avis*. I think you know enough Latin to understand that, mamma. He is not particularly refined or clever; but he is so genuine and honest, and altogether such a good fellow, that everybody likes him. They call him by his Christian name, and that says a lot.'

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Dr. Winslow came too, and talked in his kindest, most fatherly way about the necessity for taking care, and not giving the brain too much to do.

Ross listened, and smiled, and acquiesced; but inwardly chafed and rebelled. Not for one moment did *he* intend to take up the course they all prescribed.

'Let me once get about again, and we shall see,' he thought, as he listened to the Doctor's admonitions.

For some days he had been pleading in vain for one coveted indulgence. Doctor Burton had strictly forbidden all stimulants, and had turned an inexorable ear to his irritated arguments.

'Not one drop of wine, beer, or brandy,' was his reiterated reply; and not Ross's pleadings could move him. He knew what he was about, and would as soon have given his patient small doses of poison. He said so, making no secret of his contempt for stimulants.

'The fact is, it would be poison to you,' he said. 'Some people might take it, and for a time do themselves no harm; but you cannot. Now, Ross, I am going to be candid with you, my boy, and I want you to be equally candid with me. Tell me, have you not been in the habit lately of bracing yourself up for work by taking stimulants?'

'I used to have a glass of cherry brandy down at Wait's very often,' confessed Ross, turning restlessly from the keen searching gaze. 'I used to feel so faint and sinking that I was obliged to have something to pick me up.'

'Why did you feel faint and sinking?'

'I don't know; how should I?' was the impatient reply.

'What did you generally have for breakfast?'

'Sometimes one thing and sometimes another. Mamma always had a nice breakfast for us. She thought it the most important meal.'

'"Sometimes one thing and sometimes another,"' mimicked Dr. Burton, who knew more on the subject than Ross imagined. 'Why don't you speak out, and say you used to play with a bit of toast and trifle with a scrap of roll, while Aleck and Jack, like sensible fellows, were laying in a stock of good mutton chop or fresh eggs to give them strength for

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their Latin and Greek and cricket? Why didn't you eat a mutton chop every morning?'

'I hate mutton chops! A fellow can't force himself to eat, said Ross, feeling injured.

'Why couldn't you eat?'

'Because I had no appetite, I suppose! Doctor, you are as bad as the Shorter Catechism!'

'And why had you no appetite?' persisted Dr. Burton, still watching the changing face.

'I am sure I don't know.'

'What time used you to go to bed?'

'Sometimes one time, sometimes—well, say on an average between eleven and twelve.'

'What were you doing till twelve o'clock?'

'Studying.'

'Without any aid?'

No reply.

'Come, Ross, none but a fool conceals the truth from his lawyer and his doctor.'

'I used to take a little wine or brandy when I felt faint. What harm was there in that? When I was in London, mamma took me to see one of the first physicians of the day, and he ordered me to take wine—Burgundy. He said I needed it, and mamma always likes me to take it,' said Ross, with some irritation.

'Your mother is a very sensible woman as a rule, but, like a great many other sensible people, she thinks too much of what the "first physicians of the day" say, and too little of her own common sense,' replied the doctor drily. 'I've a great mind to put her and you through a course of physiology. You could judge for yourself then. But no physician in the world would order you to stimulate your flagging energies with wine or brandy, Ross. To take a glass or two of Burgundy is one thing; to drink brandy for the sake of bracing yourself up to meet unusual or usual exertion is another. The very thing you took to ward off sickness or faintness only increased your liability to incur the same feeling again. Every drop of stimulant you took exhausted some of your stock of vitality, and lessened your physical strength. Of course you had no appetite! You could not expect to have.'

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'But I did not take enough to do me harm.'

'I don't know the precise quantity you took, of course; but you took enough to keep you up to the mark, eh?'

'People always take stimulants when they feel ill.'

'Have you any idea of the effect—the ultimate effect of stimulants, Ross?'

'Taken to excess, of course I have.'

'Unless I am greatly mistaken, you have taken them to excess.'

Ross turned round with indignant eyes. 'Indeed, Dr. Burton, I have done no such thing.'

'Oh, come, come! I did not mean that you had become a habitual drunkard! Ross, do you remember that black mare of mine I had some years ago? A beautiful animal! You remember? Now I am going to tell you a tale. Once, when I was many miles from home, I was met by a man in livery, who stopped me and begged me to go at once to his master who was very ill. He knew me by sight, and had followed me down to the village instead of galloping off to Harton, where the family physician lived. As he said the case was urgent, I went, and found his master in fearful agony—poisoned! Not a moment was to be lost. His life depended upon the prompt application of remedies, of which there were none at hand. I was in a fix, Ross. There was only one horse to be had, a clumsy brute; so I set off with poor old Bess, hoping she would manage the distance in time. She was tired enough then; but I had no mercy! I never flogged a horse in my life as I flogged her, poor old Bess!'

'Did she do it?' asked Ross, with languid interest.

'She did it! As I sprang from her back, she sank to the ground exhausted. I shall never forget her look of reproach! It was human. She never completely recovered that race. Now, Ross, without the stimulus of whip and spur, I should never have got her over the ground in time; and without the stimulus of wine and brandy, you could not have sat up studying night after night till twelve and one o'clock. Is that not true?'

'I suppose it is. Yes,' was the ungracious reply.

'Would anything short of such an emergency have justified

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me in forcing a valuable and valued animal to a dangerous and injurious over-exertion?'

'No.'

'Do you see the parallel? Jaded with the day's work, your brain refused to act—it wanted rest. You were weary, body and mind, and nature could hold out no longer. Was it not so?'

'Yes.'

'And then you took a stimulant to give you strength. I suppose you thought it did give you strength?'

'It did, for the time at least,' said Ross, on the defensive.

'And the whip put real strength into Bess, I suppose.'

'It made her use what she had.'

'Now you speak the truth. It did make her use what she had; but to what cost? It used up what she had. Would you not consider the man a fool who, at the beginning of a bitterly cold day, heaped upon the fire his whole stock of fuel, that which, if husbanded, would have kept him warm all day? True, your argument would apply equally to him—he only used what he had! But what about the rest of the day? What about poor Bess's after life? I tell you she never recovered—she was never the same again. And what about yourself? You applied the spur to heart and brain, and you have sufficiently suffered, I think.'

'But my illness was the effect of over-work,' objected Ross.

'And pray how came it that the amount you did was over-work?' asked the doctor sharply. 'Many a boy works harder than you have done, and has no result of fever. Explain that.'

'I am constitutionally delicate, I suppose. What other reason should there be?'

Dr. Burton turned to the table and took up a slender glass rod.

'What is this?' he asked, examining it with interest.

'Something belonging to Aleck's electrical machine,' said Ross, glad to change a conversation which was pressing home too closely to be pleasant.

'Oh, it isn't one of those fine new-fangled drawing-room pokers, then?'

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'It would not be of much use as a poker!'

'No, it would break, wouldn't it? It is constitutionally delicate, I see, and must be handled with care,' said the doctor, with quiet sarcasm.

'Now, Dr. Burton, that is not fair. Hit a fellow in front, if you please!' said Ross, laughing in spite of his annoyance.

'If I attempt to force a glass rod to do the work of a steel one, I must be prepared to accept the consequences. That is common sense, is it not? If you attempt to force your delicate constitution to do the work of a strong one, you must take the consequences. What I want to find out now is why a certain amount of work should be too much for you this year, when last year you were well able to accomplish even more without any evil consequences.'

'I am not so strong as I was,' reluctantly admitted Ross.

'How is that? Have you had any illness? Is there any disease going on?'

'Certainly not!' fired Ross, who hated the very mention of disease.

'Then by some means you must have weakened your whole system. The fact is, Ross, you have been treating yourself exactly as I treated Bess. You have urged on your tired heart to extra exertion. You have applied the stimulus of alcohol to make it work, as I applied spur and whip. If I had repeated my experiment often, even more moderately, I should have killed my mare!—broken my glass rod! By repeated experiments upon yourself you have weakened the action of the heart, which, as you know, is the great centre of life; you have injured your digestive powers, which, by the way, accounts for your want of appetite in the morning. You have unduly excited your brain, which at last has rebelled, and made its most powerful appeal to your reason and self-interest. Now, is not this all true?'

'Could I have done my work without stimulants?' asked Ross, after a pause. 'You say they have weakened my constitution, but you forget that I did not take them till I felt my need of them, *ergo*, my constitution was weakened before I took them.'

'Clever boy!' said Dr. Burton, patting him on the

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shoulder. 'You think you have demolished me and my argument now! Come, we will go back to Bess. Poor old Bess! I never expected to draw so largely upon her for illustration. She felt herself unequal to the task before her. If she could have spoken, she would have said, "No, master, I am unequal to the exertion. I am worn out now. I have the will, but not the strength." So she thought, no doubt, if mares do think. I believe they do; but that is neither here nor there. Now, if I had replied, "All right, old lady, go and be rubbed down, have a good feed, and a good rest, and then come and tell me how you feel," the result would have been very different. She would have come to me after her rest, invigorated, strengthened, and refreshed, and would have accomplished her task without injury. Unfortunately, I could not give her this proper and natural treatment. I was forced to have recourse to stimulants, and you know the result. I daresay you were ill, or, at least, faint and weak from overwork, or even from only an average amount of work. We are not always up to the mark; but if you had then given your brain rest, and taken proper care of yourself, you would have regained tone in a short time; whereas, the stimulants led from bad to worse. It was like pouring oil on fire to put it out.'

'I hadn't time to rest.'

'Nonsense! of all the stupid, senseless arguments, Ross, don't use that. You had not time to save yourself from an illness! You had not time to save time, for that is what it really amounts to. I'll be bound you've lost more time with your headaches and languor than you would have done by throwing up every book for a month. I shall not allow you to take stimulants, Master Ross.'

'Dr. Burton,' said Ross hesitatingly, 'be kind enough not to mention our conversation to my mother—the subject of it, I mean. It would only worry her.'

'Then you must promise not to try to persuade her to break my law.'

'Very well,' said Ross, with resignation.

His common sense was, of course, convinced of the correctness of the doctor's arguments; but there is an old quaint saying, as full of truth as many of the old sayings are, 'A man

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convinced against his will, is of the same opinion still.' That expressed exactly his state of mind.

Leaving Northland, Dr. Burton called next at the Cedars; he had another patient there.

Mrs. Harborough was sitting by the window reading aloud to Clarice and Cecile. The latter was lying on the couch, her face white as the pillow on which it rested, save for the treacherous spot on either cheek. She looked up with a smile at the doctor's entrance.

'Better; I feel much stronger,' she said, in answer to his inquiries. 'My cough is troublesome; that is all.'

And as she spoke the words were checked by the dry and hacking cough. There was mischief going on there, that was evident.

'And are you good and obedient, Miss Cecile? Do you take the cod-liver oil as I ordered you to do?'

'Horrid stuff!' said Cecile, with a shudder. 'I hate the very smell! But I do take it—don't I, mamma?'

'Yes, she is very good; she takes all her medicine.' And then Mrs. Harborough went on to speak of sleepless nights, and want of appetite, and of increasing languor, watching the doctor's face anxiously all the time, as if she might read there something of the thoughts within.

'I tell you what I should do,' he said suddenly, eyeing his little patient over his spectacles. 'I should pack her off to the sea-side, and send her on the beach every day with a bucket and spade to make sand dumplings, eh? Now, I'll be bound you are laughing at me, Miss Cecile! Are you too old for a bucket and puddings? How should I know what is the proper and fashionable age to cast aside buckets, or the orthodox period for discarding spades? Make messes of sea-weed, and call them collections, if you like it better; or gather periwinkles and anemones; or, better still, go and look for water-babies among the rocks at low tide. I am going to send that boy next door away next week. Why don't you all go together?'

Again came the anxious, frightened look into Mrs. Harborough's eyes, and Clarice raised her head impetuously, as if to speak, but checked the words at a glance from her mother.

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'I will speak to Mr. Harborough. If he can make it convenient—if he has no objection'—

'Objection! My dear madam, I will see Mr. Harborough myself. This is a doctor's affair, not a domestic one; so, if you please, I must take it out of your hands altogether. Fancy talking about objections to a doctor! Why, we shall have Miss Cecile objecting to her cod-liver oil next!' And Dr. Burton looked as if such a proceeding would indicate nothing short of the first step of a social revolution. Cecile smiled, as he had intended she should, and something like a gleam of anticipation and pleasure stole into her face.

Dr. Burton drove straight to the bank and asked for Mr. Harborough. He was shown into his private room, but met with not too cordial a greeting.

'I have just come from your house,' said the doctor, dashing straightway into the business of his visit. 'I don't find your little girl any better.'

'No?' said Mr. Harborough, smiling at his own reflection in the blade of his silver knife; he was eating pine-apple.

'No,' repeated the doctor drily. 'There is want of tone, want of energy. The fact is, she needs change, and must have it. I speak plainly to you, Mr. Harborough, and I tell you that Cecile is very ill—so ill that, unless a change for the better takes place soon, she will die.'

It was plain speaking, but it affected Mr. Harborough very little.

'Eastdale is the healthiest place in England,' he said coolly. 'Will you take a glass of sherry?'

'No. Eastdale may be healthy, but death finds it out occasionally,' said the doctor grimly. 'He never forgets to call where he has once been invited. How do *you* feel this morning?'

'How should I feel? Quite well, of course. What do you mean by such a question as that? Confound you doctors! I believe you are always on the look-out for premonitory symptoms of a patient! Don't I look well?' asked Mr. Harborough, with unconscious excitement.

Dr. Burton rose and took up his hat. 'You are not my patient, Mr. Harborough; Cecile is, and I insist upon having my orders carried out. Will you kindly see that she is sent

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away next week? Remember, I decline to answer for the consequences if she remain here.'

He spoke peremptorily, but he knew his man. Mr. Harborough nodded sullenly; the half-emptied bottle by his side accounted for some slight peculiarities of voice and manner.

'And,' continued the doctor, 'as I do not wish to have you for a patient, I will give you one word of advice—Be careful.'

He was leaving the room, when Mr. Harborough brought his fist heavily down on the table, making the glasses jingle and shake.

'Stop! Now be kind enough to tell me what you see in my face to render such a warning necessary?'

Dr. Burton looked at him keenly, taking note of the hot, flushed face and trembling hands.

'Do you wish for the truth, Mr. Harborough?'

'Am I likely to want a lie?'

'Then I will tell you the truth; make what use of it you like. I see apoplexy in your face! Good morning.'

To many such an announcement would have been simply brutal. To Mr. Harborough it was merely unpleasantly suggestive. He did not believe it; not he! but it reminded him that there were such things as strokes, apoplexy, and death in the world, when he would much rather have hugged to himself the belief that they were old and out of date—misfortunes which had occasionally befallen mankind in the infancy of science, but which were dying out now.

He went home to dinner at six. Only Mrs. Harborough and Clarice were present. He looked round the table, a storm gathering in his face.

'Where is Cecile?'

'She is not well to-night; she has not been well all day. This weather tries her, I think,' was the deprecating reply.

'I asked *where* she was, not *how* she was. Can't you answer a simple question, Mrs. Harborough?'

'She is in my room.'

'Clarice, go and tell her to come down-stairs at once.'

'She is ill, papa,' said Clarice, with spirit, unheedful of her mother's imploring looks. 'She cannot bear the smell of the dinner.'

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'Do you hear what I say?'

Not daring to disobey, Clarice arose and went up-stairs. In a few minutes she returned with Cecile, who took her accustomed place at the table without a word.

'Give her some soup,' commanded Mr. Harborough.

'I cannot take anything, papa, thank you,' said the child gently.

'Give her some soup,' he repeated, in a tone which chased all colour from Mrs. Harborough's face.

Bending over her plate, Cecile tried to force the rich soup between her reluctant lips. In silence the dinner proceeded. As each course made its appearance, a portion was placed before her, and she made a frightened pretence of eating. Mr. Harborough was too much intoxicated to notice how much she really took.

Stretching out his arm, he poured out a glass of port, and passed it to her, spilling part of it on the way.

'Drink that,' he said peremptorily.

She looked at him with imploring eyes. 'Papa, I do not like wine!'

'Do as I tell you, this moment.'

'It makes me so ill!' she faltered. 'Please don't make me drink it, papa!'

'I'll make you in a way you don't like, directly,' he replied, with a flash that sent the glass to her lips. With unconquerable repugnance she shuddered as she set it down.

'I cannot drink it, papa,' she said, with a sob.

'You will drink every drop of that before you leave this table.'

Not daring to interfere, Mrs. Harborough sat with white drawn face and trembling limbs. She knew too well that one word of appeal from her would bring down the threatening storm in all its fury. Her heart grew sick as she glanced at the red, bloated face opposite, and then at that fair little downcast head, with its unmistakable droop of tired faintness.

As the dishes were removed, and the dessert placed on the table, she made a signal to the servant to withdraw. She had to watch her opportunity for even that: if Mr. Harborough had seen it he would have ordered the man to stay.

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Clarice sat mute and still, every pulse throbbing with wild, indignant, helpless anger and fear. A quivering, suppressed sob from the opposite side of the table made her hastily raise her eyes, but the sight of the little sad, pale face was more than she could bear.

'Papa,' she said wildly, 'Cecile is ill! she cannot bear it! Let me drink the wine for her! Please let me!'

'If you are so anxious for a glass of wine, have one of your own,' he said tauntingly. Every evil passion in his nature was raised. He read the fear and horror in every face, and it maddened him. His wife's silence, which he interpreted as condemning, irritated him beyond endurance, and Clarice's insolent defiance roused a devil within him.

'I am not anxious for a glass! I hate it! I will never touch a drop as long as I live! never!' cried the excited child. All restraint was gone now, and the pent-up indignation burst all bounds. In vain Mrs. Harborough pleaded,—

'Clarice! Clarice! my darling, be quiet for all our sakes!'

'No, mamma! I cannot be quiet! I must speak! He is killing Cecile! It is wicked, papa! it is! How dare you do it? how can you do it? You will break mamma's heart! You have made our home wretched! You have made us all afraid of you!' panted Clarice, daring everything now, and only recognising her fear through her uncontrollable trembling. 'I hate the very sight of wine and brandy! they have made you what you are! They make you mad! yes, mad, papa! you are mad, or you would never, never do such cruel, wicked things!'

'I think *you* are mad,' he answered, his eyes glowing with evil fury. 'Come here.'

She rose at once and went to his side. Mrs. Harborough started to her feet.

'Sit down!' thundered her husband.

'Papa! papa!' gasped Cecile; 'I will drink the wine! I will, indeed. I don't mind it now! I will drink it all!'

He took no heed, but tightened his hold on Clarice's slender arms.

'I am mad, am I? and cruel and wicked? You are afraid of me, are you? You shall have cause.'

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Not a sound escaped from the child's white lips, though his fingers pressed viciously into her soft flesh.

'I have made your home wretched, have I?' he went on, with taunting deliberation. 'I shall break mamma's heart, shall I? And what if I do?'

'Then God will punish you, papa,' said Clarice steadily, but faint with unutterable fear.

'You will never touch a drop of wine or brandy as long as you live? You hate the very sight of them? And what if I make you touch them?'

Clarice compressed her lips firmly, but made no reply.

Turning to the table, still holding her with one hand, he mixed a glass of brandy and water with the other. Breathless with horror, Mrs. Harborough and Cecile waited for the next scene in the drama.

'Drink that.'

'Papa, *I will not!*' was the low reply. Her father looked at her, and she shivered, and made a movement as if to escape. But he held her too tightly for that.

'Will you drink that brandy and water,' he asked slowly, never once removing his eyes from her face.

'I will not touch it!'

Holding both her arms with his one strong hand, he lifted the glass to her lips.

'Now, mark me, if you do not drink that of your own free will, I will force every drop down your throat.'

'My darling! drink it! just one drop! He will kill you if you do not!' gasped Mrs. Harborough.

Clarice looked at her and tried to smile. 'Never mind, mamma. I do not care if he does. I will never touch it!'

With an oath, Mr. Harborough rose to his feet.

'Papa! papa!' shrieked Cecile; and the next moment her arms were round him, and her face, full of agonized entreaty, turned up towards his. She tried to speak, but could only gasp again, 'Papa!' And then her head dropped upon his arm. He shook her off, and she fell heavily upon the floor, her head coming in contact with the sharp corner of the sideboard.

Relaxing his hold on Clarice, Mr. Harborough said sullenly,—

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'Pick her up.'

Clarice knelt beside her and lifted her head, but as she saw the red blood trickling down her face she uttered a low cry of horror. Looking up at her father, she whispered, 'You have killed her!'

Half-sobered by the shock, he stooped and lifted the little slender form and placed it on a couch.

'Send for the doctor—not Burton,' he said hoarsely, standing as if fascinated by the slow drip of the blood upon the crimson cushion.

The servants came whispering round the door, gazing with frightened eyes upon the scene within.

'Go for the doctor, please,' said Clarice, in a whisper. 'Go, quick!'

She was the only one who could give the order. Her mother knelt beside the couch, absorbed in trying to staunch the blood, and Mr. Harborough stood gazing blankly at his work.

At the gate the servant met Jack Norman, coming with a message from his mother.

'Oh, Master Jack,' he cried, 'Miss Cecile is dead! I am going for the doctor! Wherever shall I find him?'

'Dead!' echoed Jack, in consternation. 'Here, you run to the surgery, and I'll run to his house; we shall stand a better chance of finding him.'

He started off, revolving the news as he went. 'If he has killed her he'll be hung!' he muttered, with grim satisfaction.

Dr. Burton was at home, and instantly left his dinner-table to accompany him back. They found Cecile trying to sit up, looking ghastly with her white, stained face.

'I am better. I am not much hurt,' she whispered. 'Where is papa? Tell him.'

Mr. Harborough had disappeared. He could not face the end he thought was coming. He thought he had killed his child.

The wound was not a dangerous one, except in its effect upon the delicate nervous system. Dr. Burton bound it up, and sent her to bed, good-humouredly rallying her on her inability to keep her feet. No one explained how or why she fell, but he had a shrewd suspicion that Mr. Harborough

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had had something to do with it. He made no inquiries, after the first question or two; the reluctant answers, and look of bitter shame and misery on Mrs. Harborough's face, sealed his lips.

Jack, who, on seeing that Cecile was not dead, had withdrawn to the garden, joined him as he came out. 'That is some of Mr. Harborough's doings, I'll be bound!' he said, nodding back towards the house.

'They did not say, but it is more than possible. Jack, my boy, never take to drink!' said the doctor impressively, laying his hand on the boy's shoulder. 'It has brought more sorrow and misery into Eastdale than any other cause in the world! it has brought more curse upon England! There is more trouble to come to that house yet. God only knows what the end there will be.'

'Dr. Burton, tell me, is Cecile really ill?' asked Jack, looking troubled.

'Yes, she is; and, what is more, she will get worse, I am afraid. I am going to send her to the sea-side.'

'What is the matter with her?'

'Nothing but what might be stopped under other circumstances. Five years ago Ross was nearly as bad, and if your home had been like Cecile's he would have been dead by this time. Money can do much, but it can't buy a mind at rest. That child lives in perpetual fear; her mind is always on the strain, poor little thing!'

'It's murder!' exclaimed candid Jack. 'It's a sort of slow poisoning! it's killing by inches, that's what it is! Why, Dr. Burton, if she does not get better, you ought to inform the authorities! he ought to be made to be different! What will you do?'

'Send her away now, and keep her away as long as I can. Mind this goes no further, Jack.'

Hearing the doctor leave, Mr. Harborough rang his bell violently. Not knowing what mood he was in, and fearing to let a servant go to him, Mrs. Harborough hurried down, leaving Cecile on the bed.

'Well,' he said, as she entered, 'why don't you speak? What do you stand there for like that?'

'What did you ring for, Robert?' she asked gently.

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'What did I ring for?' he sneered. 'What is the matter with Cecile?'

'She fainted. The cut is a deep one.'

'What business had she to faint? Little beggar! She did it to frighten me, I suppose,' he said, his anger rising with redoubled fury because of his recent terror. 'I'll teach her to play her tricks on me! And you encourage her, madam!'

'Indeed, it was no trick, Robert. She is ill—really ill! My poor child!'

'Then go and tell your poor child that if ever she faints again, I'll wait till she comes to, and perform a little doctoring of my own. You need not stand there any longer.'

It was worse than useless to answer or argue with him; he had no more command of himself than had poor Cecile in her fall. Silently she turned and left the room.

He remained there, drinking and singing snatches of low songs till midnight, making a terror of the darkness to his little girls. Clasped in each other's arms, they lay and listened, with loudly-beating hearts and trembling limbs, as the sounds came floating up. Bursts of laughter, mingled with the jerks of song, and then came a smash of broken glass, followed by the violent ringing of the bell.

At last they heard him stagger up the stairs and into his own room, and silence came. They fell asleep towards morning, and in the dim twilight of the first approach of dawn a white-robed figure stole with noiseless step into their room and knelt beside the bed.

'Hush, darling, hush!' murmured Clarice in her sleep, as Cecile moaned and sobbed.

'My precious children! my little girls! O God! for their sakes hear me! Give them back their father!' whispered the white lips by their side.

'Hush, darling, hush!'

'Not for my own sake! for theirs! Father, have mercy. Hast thou forsaken me, O my God?' wrestled a breaking heart.

The sun rose in the crimson east, and sent his rays straight through the clustering vine-leaves to the white-draped bed—first on the back-drawn curtains, dancing and leaping, now on

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the pillows, now on the straggling curls, darting among the meshes, playing hide-and-seek among the shadows, gleaming and glinting over the gold; now lower, flickering softly upon the drooping eyelashes. What! not dry yet?

Softly the curtain is drawn, and a lingering kiss is left on each sweet face; so fair, but ah! the contrast! One flushed with the glow of health, and beautiful with buoyant life; the other lovely, with a rarer, purer grace, the shadowed promise of a diviner radiance, a faint and dim foretelling of heaven's own stainless beauty.

Leave them, and let them sleep, for they see the angels in their dreams, and the tremulous lips break into smiles, and earth and all its griefs are lost awhile.

Mr. Harborough did not make his appearance till noon the next day. He cast his eye contemptuously over the well-spread table, and threw himself into his favourite chair.

'Will you not take lunch to-day?' asked his wife timidly. Clarice sat mute, with downcast eyes.

'It will be time to talk of eating when there's anything fit to eat. Where is Cecile?'

'Asleep in my room. You will not wake her, Robert?' He had risen, and deigned no answer as he left the room. With heavy step he went up-stairs, and opened the door of the little sunny sitting-room.

Cecile was lying asleep on the couch, and he went and stood beside her. Leagued to deceive him! so he thought, and his lip curled in a mocking smile. But there was no deception there, as even his clouded brain could tell. Perfectly still and motionless lay the sleeping child, with her little thin, white hands folded on her breast. There was not a vestige of colour in her face, save the dark rings round her eyes, and the red glow on her temple.

He stood and gazed, till a sudden terror fell upon him, and he stooped and listened. Not a sound! She must be dead! 'Cecile! Cecile!' he muttered hoarsely, not daring to touch the folded hands. 'Cecile! child!'

Slowly the long lashes were lifted, and the dark eyes gazed up into his with fixed and solemn questioning. Busy thoughts came crowding into the dulled mind as he stood chained to the spot. What did she mean? What

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made her look like that? Was it Cecile,—little, gentle, timid Cecile? What spirit had taken possession of her, and was gazing at him through her eyes? How dared she look at him like that? And then the wild, senseless fury rose, and crowded out the thoughts, and rushed up to his hot eyes, and looked out, and met an answering horror in the eyes below! He saw it, and with an oath turned round and staggered from the room.

He was brought home that night dead drunk, and was carried up to bed, where he stayed till the next evening. Coming down-stairs then, he met the doctor in the hall, and would have passed on, but was not allowed.

'I have taken lodgings by the sea for Cecile,' said the doctor, speaking as he always did to this man, whom he had known intimately for many years. 'I wish her to go on Monday. Will you see that my directions are carried out? How do you feel to-day?'

Mr. Harborough looked at him, rage and a vague terror struggling in his eyes. Passing him in silence, he went into the dining-room, and flung a roll of five-pound notes upon the table.

'Take those and go,' he said to his wife, and the subject was dropped.

The next week they went with Mrs. Norman, Ross, and Maggie to the sea-side.

The fresh, invigorating breezes did much for Ross. Obedient to the doctor's orders, he spent nearly all his time upon the shore, or wandering over the hills. Sometimes Clarice and Maggie went with him, but he preferred his solitary walks, when no necessity of conversation forced him from his reveries and day-dreams.

In another respect, too, Ross obeyed the doctor's orders: he never asked for wine. Not that he in any way acquiesced with the general opinion that his brain was too weak for stimulants; but, in the freedom from all worry, he did not feel the old craving for them. True, he rebelled against the restriction, and, but for a certain sense of honour, would have broken through it long before—simply because he was accustomed to his daily wine, and did not like its tasteless substitute. But it required no great effort to abstain.

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Cecile improved, too. Freed from the depressing weight of a ceaseless fear, her spirits rose. A faint colour stole into the pale cheeks, and the delicate face lost somewhat of its exceeding fragility. They all guarded and watched over her as if she were some precious treasure—as, indeed, she was. Even madcap Maggie grew gentle and thoughtful in her new capacity—that of assistant-nurse.

Those were happy days. Long sunny mornings on the shore, where the waves made ceaseless music; shorter afternoons, when, lying on her couch, the little invalid watched the merry children at their play; or, nestled among soft cushions, took long drives among the pleasant inland lanes, where nuts and blackberries grew and ripened; rapidly-darkening evenings, when the moon made haste to rise in dusky red, but set in clearest silver.

Sometimes the wind veered round, and from a rougher quarter lashed the waves to foam, and sent them rolling in with crested heads to break upon the shore and throw their sparkling spray right in the open window.

Such merry times! and if one mother's heart could never stop its ceaseless ache, she showed no sign.

The children never knew how the long hours from dark to dawn were spent in that smaller room beside their own. Had Mr. Harborough known, he would have laughed. Prayers! and for him! Too good a joke!

Left to their own devices, Aleck and Jack found the time hang heavily upon their hands. Breakfast, dinner, tea, and supper! how Jack detested them all! They took it in turn to preside, in order to relieve the monotony, and they broke more china in one week than was usually broken in six months.

This was Aleck's last half at school. In January he would be seventeen, at which age he was to enter a solicitor's office in the town, and he was making the most of his time.

Among the scholarships and exhibitions belonging to the school was one on which Ross had long set his heart—the Rutland exhibition, value fifty pounds a year for three years.

It was coveted by all the upper school boys, and regarded by some of the more aspiring as a possible future glory. It

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fell open to competition at Christmas twelvemonth, and already speculations were rife as to the lucky candidate.

Three of the boys had set it before them as the goal of all their hopes, three, under the circumstances, well matched—Ross Norman, Derrick Forbes, and Richard Crawford. It was not so much a matter of mere ambition as a necessity to them, for it was the magic key with which they hoped to open the closed doors of the University.

All three were comparatively poor, and University life was expensive. Without the exhibition, not one could hope to realize his most cherished dreams; and, consequently, it assumed for them a relative importance far beyond its actual value. It was of this that Ross dreamed dreams beside the murmuring sea, and it was this which made his illness then so hard to bear.

Chafing against his enforced idleness, he grew impatient as the days wore on. Nothing but a promise, exacted from his reluctant lips, by the far-seeing doctor, kept him from his books. Much as he loved the sea, and dear as the rocky shore had grown,—beautiful as was the music of the waves, and full of mystery the solemn cliffs,—he turned from all, and longed for his quiet room at home, and his beloved books. The constant fear that while he idled others would outstrip him in the race grew almost unbearable, and he hailed the last day of their visit with glad delight.

He made a partial confidante of Cecile. Left together as they often were, he insensibly fell into the habit of talking to her about his future, and of his hopes and fears. Reserved and shy, but full of unobtrusive sympathy, the gentle child possessed for him a never-failing charm. He liked to see the rapt look in the earnest eyes as lying on the shingle by her side he told her strange, weird legends, or read pieces from his beloved Longfellow.

And for her sake he was sorry when their stay was over. He saw the timid, frightened look come into her face when home was mentioned, and his heart grew pitiful and angry.

'Have you no relatives with whom you could go and spend a long, long visit, Cecile?' he asked, as they sat for the last time upon the shore. 'Eastdale does not suit you, I am sure.'

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It was not Eastdale that did not suit her! but she understood him, and shook her head.

'No; papa does not like mamma's relations, and will never let us visit them; and I don't like my uncle and aunt Harborough.'

'I wish you could come and live with us. Come and be my little sister; I will take such care of you, Cecile,' he said caressingly. 'I will be your brother.'

Her face brightened, and she smiled. 'I wish you were my brother, dear Ross; you are so good to me!' she said simply, putting her hand in his. And then a shadow came across her face, and somehow he knew that she was thinking how well it was for him that he was not her brother! For the first time in her life she was glad that their little baby-boy had died.

Mr. Harborough was not at home when they returned. The servants said he had gone the previous day, taking his portmanteau with him, and leaving no message. Being thus left free, they all went to Northland, and spent the evening together.

There were many things to hear: Aleck and Jack were full of items of school news interesting to Ross, and he was full of eager questioning.

'Was there any talk about the Rutland? Who was considered likely to take it?'

'Arthur thinks Crawford stands a good chance; so does Forbes,' said Jack. 'So do you, Ross, if you get up your strength. But you must not over-work yourself, old fellow, for fifty exhibitions.'

Ross smiled. How little they knew him if they thought he would quietly stand by and see the coveted prize walked off with by another! In the course of the evening Dr. Burton walked in.

'So, Miss Cecile, you have come back! but where are the fine roses you promised me?' he asked, with assumed indignation, looking over his glasses.

They appeared in a moment, but were soon gone again.

'Eastdale does not agree with her; the thought of coming back stole her roses,' said Ross. The doctor glanced at him.

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'You have made good use of your time, sir. No more overworked brain, if you please.'

'When are you going to let me return to school?'

'Can't you be content away from that school? Bless the boy! you have school on the brain, now, I suppose!'

'Yes, I have. I have had it there a long time now, and it affects my health.'

'Fiddlesticks!'

'May I go on Monday? I am quite well, and it does me more harm to stay at home. Will Monday do?'

'Certainly not!'

'Tuesday, then?'

The doctor deigned no reply, but addressed himself to Mrs. Harborough. Ross laughed, and resigned himself to an easy chair.

When the doctor left he followed him out, and walked with him to the gate.

'Seriously, Dr. Burton, when may I return to school? I am quite well now,' he said quietly and gravely, but waiting for the answer with almost breathless anxiety.

'I cannot tell. I must watch you, Ross, and see how you get on the next week or two. Do not be in too great a hurry; you know the old proverb, "More haste, less speed." That will be your case if you don't look out.'

'Well, it is no use kicking,' he replied, checking a sigh. 'Look at me through your rosiest glass, doctor, and give me licence as soon as you can.'

From that time he did his utmost to look well whenever he thought it likely he should see Dr. Burton. If he felt the old languor creeping over him, he threw it off with an effort, and became the gayest of the gay. Not knowing how much of this was unnatural and forced, his friends spoke of the wonderful change for the better which had taken place, and even his mother ventured to suggest to the doctor that he might safely resume his studies.

It was a glad day for him when he once more occupied his old place, and received the hearty congratulations of his masters and schoolfellows. Parker looked sourly at him, and sneeringly remarked that, of course, Norman would not go in for the Rutland, as he would not get it if he did. This,

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straightway carried to Ross, made him slightly compress his lips—nothing more, outwardly. It had not needed the spur of a sneer to urge him to immediate action.

Taught a certain amount of wisdom by the painful experience of the past, he resumed his studies gradually, and put aside his books on the first approach of languor or faintness. The fact was, he was afraid of Dr. Burton, whose keen eyes were difficult to deceive.

Mr. Harborough was away a week after the return from the sea-side. He came home without sending previous notice, and walked into the drawing-room. The sisters were there alone, and Cecile's fitful colour came and went. Not knowing what mood he was in, they dared not go forward to greet him, but rose and stood, irresolute.

'You are dutiful, affectionate daughters,' he said, throwing himself in an arm-chair. 'Is that how you meet your father after not seeing him for weeks?—not even how d'ye do? Nice daughters!'

'How are you, papa?' said Cecile gently. Clarice stood proud and silent.

'Umph! A great deal you care how I am! Where is your mother?'

'She is out, papa. Mrs. Norman called for her. She will not be long.'

'Oh! I suppose you have struck up a friendship with the Normans, together, you and your mother,' he sneered.

'They have been very kind to us, papa.'

'Kind! What business had any one to be *kind* to you? You talk like a charity child!'

Cecile made no reply. Afraid to leave the room, they sat side by side on the couch, pretending to read, and clasping each other's hand to keep up what courage they could. It was an unspeakable relief when he ordered them out of the room.

In the hall they met Ross, and Clarice gave him a warning signal. He understood, and followed them to the library.

'He has come back, then?' he whispered eagerly. 'What—how—is he all right?'

How to put the question on his lips he did not know; it seemed cruel to ask bluntly, 'Is he sober?'

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Cecile's lips suddenly trembled, and Clarice turned to the window in a storm of passionate shame.

'And Mrs. Harborough is out!' cried Ross. 'You must not stay here!—it is not safe! Come home with me. I will not leave you here.'

'He will be so angry! No, Ross; indeed, it will not be wise to come,' said Clarice. 'If he finds we are out he will be worse than ever.'

'But will he know?'

'The drawing-room window—the south one—looks down the drive, and he is sitting opposite it.'

'Then come out at the side door, and I will help you to climb the wall! No one will know, and you will be in our garden in three minutes,' urged Ross. But they would not yield. He had to leave them, and did so most reluctantly.

The next day a note came for Mrs. Norman. Mr. Harborough had forbidden his wife and children to hold any communication with their neighbours, and had ordered the friendship to be dropped.

Mrs. Norman looked grieved, and the boys stormed furiously. Ross, especially, was indignantly angry. Nothing in the world, he said, should force him to drop the friendship, and the very fact that Mr. Harborough had commanded such a thing should only make him more determined to maintain it.

'Go and see Mrs. Harborough, mamma, and hear what she says. I daresay he has forced her to write that precious letter,' said Aleck, tossing it contemptuously across the table.

Mrs. Norman assented, and the next day, after seeing Mr. Harborough safely out of the house, she went.

The boys hurried home from school, eager to hear the result of the visit; but she had not returned.

'She's been gone nearly two hours! I believe Mr. Harborough has got her!' cried Maggie, with wide-open eyes of horror at the thought. 'Oh, Aleck, what shall we do? Suppose he won't let her come home!'

'Stuff!' said Aleck, but he began to feel rather uncomfortable. Not that he feared anything for his mother; but her long stay made him apprehensive of some fresh trouble for Mrs. Harborough or the children. It was a relief to the feelings of all when Mrs. Norman was seen entering the gate.

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'Well, mamma,' said Ross impatiently, as she slowly untied her bonnet-strings.

'Well, my dears, I am afraid we must give up our pleasant friendship,' she replied, with a sigh.

A chorus of expostulatory exclamations interrupted her, but she proceeded quietly.

'Hear me out before you make any rash resolves. You, Aleck, know enough of the law to be aware of Mr. Harborough's power: within his own house he is master, and his authority is beyond dispute. His wife and children are completely at his mercy, and as long as he keeps within the bounds laid down by the law, and does not actually maltreat them, he can do what he pleases. If he chooses to forbid their leaving the house at all, he has a perfect right to do it, and no one can interfere. He can do anything short of actual violence.'

'The law takes no notice of mental torture! He may break their hearts, and crush them with fear and shame, but *that* is no offence!' said Ross, pacing to and fro in his wrath. 'Go on; let us hear the end, mamma.'

'Mrs. Harborough and I have talked it over. She says that, in his present mood, opposition or disobedience would stir him up to greater violence and anger; that their only safe course is quiet submission. She hopes that, as time passes, he may change his mind; but the possibility, not to speak of probability, rests entirely upon their present acquiescence in his will. I do not see how we are to help it, my dears; any overture on our part will only bring them into greater trouble, and I am sure we do not wish to do that.'

'Then are we never to speak to them again?' cried Maggie, with dismay.

'We are never to visit there, and they are never to come here. If you meet them out, I suppose you may speak,' said Mrs. Norman, somewhat doubtfully.

'Did you see Cecile? how is she?' asked Ross, when they had digested the unpleasant news.

'Yes, I saw her; she was lying down, and looked wretchedly ill. She is so afraid of her father, poor little thing!'

'No wonder! He'll kill her, and then he will be satisfied, I hope,' growled Jack, dragging his chair to the table. 'Let us have tea and get to work; I want to expend my fury on

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something, and may as well turn it to account by attacking my Greek!'

From that time the boys kept a sharp look-out for their neighbours, but rarely saw them. The servants talked, as servants always do, and through them they heard that Cecile was growing more and more fragile, and spent most of her time on the couch in her mother's sitting-room. Dr. Burton brought them reports of his little patient, but ceased to speak hopefully of a possible recovery.

They were dull, dreary days for the sisters and their mother. November's dark, foggy weather, grey, cheerless mornings, and drizzling afternoons kept them close prisoners, and they had few visitors. Mona and Grace and Dora went as often as they dared; but the fear of meeting Mr. Harborough made their visits few and far between. For some reason, Mr. Harborough began to spend much more of his time at home; and, as he always expected his wife to remain in his presence till he signified it his pleasure she should withdraw, the children were much alone.

They were sitting by the fire one afternoon, listening for their father's steps, when the servant brought in a basket and a note.

Clarice began to cut the string, which fastened down the lid, while Cecile read her note.

'A pigeon! Clarice, it is a pigeon! be careful!' she cried, sitting up, and flushing with surprise and pleasure.

It was a beautiful little carrier pigeon: so tame, that, as Cecile stroked its soft head, it ran its beak over her arm as if kissing it. In great delight she lifted it out, and it stood on her hand and let her caress and smooth it. The note was from Ross. He had tamed the pigeon on purpose for her, and it was to be her little messenger, and fly to him whenever she wanted him to do anything for her.

The little thing soon became accustomed to its new home, and flew to and fro between the two houses, carrying all sorts of messages—motherly ones from Mrs. Norman; kindly, sympathetic ones from Aleck; long, brotherly, affectionate ones from Ross; funny ones from Jack; and the essence of comicality from Maggie.

The winter wore on. Christmas came, and, covered with

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schoolboy laurels, possessing the respect and affection of masters and schoolfellows, Aleck left Eastdale Grammar School.

On his seventeenth birthday there was a large party at Northland—a birthday and Christmas party in one. Dr. Winslow and his children, Mr. and Mrs. Crawford and their children, and a number of other friends, were present. Dr. Burton came late.

Ross was resting on a couch; he was still somewhat of an invalid. Some one had drawn a little table to his side, and his glass of wine stood on it. The doctor went round, and stood behind him.

'Humph! What about my orders, Master Ross?'

Ross looked up. 'Privilege! privilege! A truce to orders at Christmas time, doctor! How could I drink Aleck's health in water?'

'How many glasses have you had?'

'This is my third; honour bright.'

'Three too many,' was the disapproving answer.

'Take a glass yourself, doctor,' said Ross mischievously. 'It will do you good.'

'"Take a glass, it will do you good!"' repeated Dr. Burton. 'When people learn to speak the truth they will omit the latter clause. What good would it do me, Ross?'

'It would revive your drooping spirits,' said Ross gaily. 'Cheer and exhilarate.'

'And then depress. My spirits are not drooping, thank you, Ross. I do not suffer from that complaint. Mind, I will have no more drinking stimulants after to-night. If your spirits droop, come to me and I will find something to support them.'

'A black draught, I suppose,' said Ross, with his favourite shrug.

Dr. Burton nodded and laughed, and passed on.

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CHAPTER V.

ROSS NORMAN DETERMINES TO MAKE UP FOR LOST TIME, AND WIN THE RUTLAND PRIZE, BUT AGAIN TAKES TO DRINK.

ROSS found it no easy thing to make up for lost time; but, having great confidence in himself, he looked to the coming year to restore all that by his illness he had forfeited. He returned to school after Christmas with one bright goal in view—the Rutland.

Jack was still under a cloud. His name had been excluded from all the soirée invitations, and the Doctor treated him with distant kindness. Jack said nothing, but worked on steadily, and gradually forsook the more questionable of his old companions. *They* said he was aiming at Aleck's vacated place among the Levites.

'What has the Doctor against you now?' asked Ross, waking up one day to the fact that Jack was still in disgrace. 'I thought that old affair with Hickory had blown over long ago.'

Jack winced. 'It takes a precious long time for anything like that to blow over! But I got into another row—not much of an affair—and the Doctor cut up rusty about it. Never mind; I'll live it down yet.'

'But I don't like your being omitted from the soirées; it looks bad,' answered Ross irritably. 'People keep asking where my brother is, and of course they know what it means when I say you are not present. I wish you'd keep out of rows!'

'I mean to,' said Jack significantly. He thought it rather

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hard that Ross, of all in the world, should come down up him for being in the Doctor's black books.

Ross himself was in special favour. Dr. Winslow, beside his natural pride as a master in an exceptionally clever pupil, felt a warm personal attachment to him, and watched over him, lest he should overwork his strength, with almost fatherly interest and solicitude. This was gratifying, of course; nevertheless, Ross often shrugged his shoulders in anything but a grateful way. The restrictions laid upon him interfered with his studies, and he chafed against them, and rebelled in secret.

'Such molly-coddling!' he murmured with disgust. 'As if one were a delicate girl!'

He was the more annoyed on finding, as time went on, that Forbes and Crawford steadily kept ahead of him. It was by no means the simple thing he had imagined to leave them behind in the race.

Once more he began to burn the midnight gas, and as a consequence his strength began to fail. He concealed this as much as possible, putting on the old fictitious gaiety to deceive his mother's eyes. Even if his pale face and heavy eyes attracted her attention and roused a momentary anxiety, his high spirits and repeated assurances of health put her off her guard, and lulled suspicion.

Soon came the inevitable languor and loss of mental and physical power. He could not long concentrate his attention, and his flagging energies alarmed him, and invested the Rutland with the increased value and charm of uncertainty. The thought of losing it became unbearable, and with painful eagerness he bent, night after night, over the pages which were once more beginning to puzzle his weary brain. What had formerly been simple enough presented now apparently insurmountable difficulties, and in despair one night he flung down his pen, and dropped his head on his arm.

'I cannot do it! I cannot do it!' he murmured, while scalding tears rose to his aching eyes. 'I shall have to give it up, and be the laughing-stock of the whole school! How that beast Parker will rejoice!'

As the image of Parker's malicious, mocking face rose up before him, he grew wild with intense mortification and grief.

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Rising from his seat, he hastily crossed the room, and dipped his face in the basin of water. It was not cold enough to chill him, but it refreshed and roused, and he went back for one more trial. The clock struck eleven as he sat gazing blankly at the book before him. All the old bewildered, stupid feeling was creeping over him, and in vain were his attempts to shake it off.

'And one glass of brandy and water would set me right,' he said to himself dreamily. 'What a fool I am!'

A fool! because he shrank from taking the one decisive step backward. But though he shrank from the thought, he brooded over it against his will. He honestly wished to give up what his own reason told him was a dangerous habit; but set against the wish was the knowledge that the Rutland was at stake, and that upon his strength this one year depended his whole future career.

'I'll put it up for to-night; I will see what a night's rest will do,' he thought.

But his busy brain had refused to rest acquiescent with his will. All night long he tossed from side to side, longing for the morning. Never had the hours dragged so slowly. The early rising bell rang at last, and only too gladly he sprang from his unrefreshing pillow, and took in the cup of steaming coffee waiting for him outside his door. That and his bath put some fresh life into his languid frame, and, feeling that all was not lost yet, he finished dressing, and hurried down to the little morning study, where a cheerful fire waited him. Here he studied till breakfast-time alone. Jack had overslept himself, and Aleck had given up his early schoolboy hours.

All that day he was haunted by one thought. No matter what he was doing, it started up, and, forcing everything else aside, compelled his reluctant attention. When night came would he be able sufficiently to concentrate his thoughts to accomplish the task before him? It was a double task now, for he had lost a day.

Several times he caught Jack watching him with what seemed to him a strange expression in his eyes. He could not understand it, and began to wonder if he looked ill, or if any rumour concerning him were afloat in the school of which Jack was aware.

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His curiosity at last overcame his natural reticence and reserve, and, with the irritability which was fast becoming habitual to him, he hurried after Jack and overtook him on the bridge.

'I say, Jack, what's the matter? Is there anything up?' he asked.

Jack looked up and hesitated.

'What is it? Say out and don't keep it back, for the sake of my feelings, for mercy's sake!' said Ross, worried out of all patience.

'It's nothing; you needn't put yourself out,' replied Jack, with unwonted gentleness in voice and face. 'Only some of the fellows were saying how ill you looked, and wondering if you really meant to go in for the Rutland. Aubrey said your hands trembled as you turned over the leaves of your book, and I said the weak and unsteady state of his intellect doubtless produced the impression.'

He did not add that he had watched for himself, and seen even more than Aubrey. Ross fired up angrily.

'I would like to kick that fellow. What business had he to watch me? My hands are as steady as his, any day. I daresay they'd like me to give up the Rutland!'

'Aubrey wouldn't get it if you did. Forbes stands the best chance, I think; some of them say Crawford.'

'And no one thinks much of my chance,' said Ross unreasonably. 'Well, let them wait and see. They may have occasion to change their minds.'

'Meanwhile, don't see yourself into your grave,' replied Jack drily. Considering that this unparalleled feat was a little beyond his power, Ross's contemptuous silence was not to be wondered at. Jack's words rankled in his mind all the rest of the day, and left him no peace. It was hard work to talk and act as if no weight were pressing heavily on him, and to feign interest in even Aleck's usually welcome office gossip. As early as possible he escaped to his own cosey room, where every night a mother's forethought prepared a ruddy cheering fire. Mrs. Norman knew how strong the temptation to sit up and give at least a half-hour to the morning's work was for her boys, and, unwisely perhaps, she made it easy for Ross by seeing that his room was always warm. The fact was, she

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dreaded his sitting up in the cold, knowing that he would do this if she refused him a fire.

But she had no idea how often the midnight hour found him poring over his books, oblivious of the smouldering embers.

It was not often that Jack experienced a sleepless night. His usual practice was to throw himself on the bed, draw the blankets simply round his ears, and straightway depart to the land of dreams. Not that he was much troubled by dreams either; an occasional nightmare serving as unpleasant reminder that sleep did not necessarily involve entire absence of brain activity. After disposing of the morning's lessons, he rose to follow Ross's example, and went to his own room. But, to his somewhat indignant surprise, sleep refused to visit him, despite his repeated summons in the form of repetitions of the most monotonous verses he could recollect. After stumbling through 'How the Waters came down at Lodore,' he sat up in bed and began to wonder if he were going to be ill.

'A pretty time for a fellow to be hugging his knees,' he grumbled, as the clock on the landing announced midnight. 'A nice thing for me if I'm going to have brain-fever or small-pox! and I believe I am!'

A sudden and slight sound outside his door stopped his meditations, and instantly he was on the alert. Every sound in the old house was familiar to him, and he knew that peculiar creak well. Some one was trying to steal noiselessly up or down the passage.

His first thoughts flew to Aleck and Ross; but it was so unlike either of them to creep down in that stealthy fashion that he at once dismissed the idea, and turned to the servants. But here again he was puzzled. What business had they near his door at all? They had their own staircase leading to their own regions down-stairs. Was it his mother, then? No. Her room was some way from his, and close to the head of the staircase. There would be no occasion for her to pass his door.

The more he thought the more puzzled he grew. Stealing out of bed, he went to the door and listened. Some one was certainly creeping stealthily down the stairs. He knew each creak of the time-worn boards. Having, as he thought, dis-

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posed of every one in the house, the next suggestion naturally was thieves! Jack was by no means a nervous or timid boy, and the very idea gave him positive pleasure. In schoolboy parlance it promised a 'lark,' and he was all on the *qui vive* with excitement.

Drawing on his clothes, he cautiously turned the handle of the door, which had a troublesome habit of clicking loudly. His heart began to beat rather fast when he found himself safely on the landing. All was pitch dark; but he knew every step of the way too well to hesitate on that score. With noiseless tread he stole down the stairs, and then stood still and listened.

Click!—that was the dining-room door. Not quite decided as to his best course, he hesitated between going back and awaking Aleck, and going forward. Fearing, however, that if he did the former the thief might possibly be alarmed and make his escape, he resolved at all risks to go on, and follow up the adventure. The striking of a match in the dining-room made him jump, and with a pleasant sense of danger ahead he stole to the door and looked in.

For a moment he could see nothing but a faint glimmer of light on the floor. Then he saw that the doors of the side-board were open, hiding both the lantern or candle and the thief himself. Gathering courage as he heard the chink of glass, he went forward on tiptoe, keeping well out of the line of light.

A dark figure was kneeling on the floor before the side-board, with a bottle in its hand. It was stooping; but suddenly, as he bent forward with eager gaze, his heart thumping loudly, it rose, and the light shone full on its face.

'Hallo, Ross!'

Coming suddenly upon him in his supposed security, and out of the darkness of the long dining-room, the shock was more than Ross, in his unstrung, nervously-excitable state, could bear. With an almost hysterical cry of terror, he dropped the light which he had that moment taken in his hand, and sprang to his feet.

'Who is there? Who are you?' he said, trembling in every limb. 'What do you want?'

Convulsed with laughter, the more uncontrollable for the

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reaction from the recent strain, Jack staggered to the couch and rolled over among the cushions.

Ross stood perfectly still. 'Jack!' he whispered. 'Jack!'

'Oh!' gasped Jack. 'I thought it was a thief! I was going to knock you over the head, and tie your feet and hands with the bell rope, and duck you in the water-butt! Oh, Ross, you'll be the death of me! I shall never get over it! never!'

'Shut up, you fool!' cried Ross, under his breath. 'You'll rouse the whole house.'

'I had actually made up the paragraph for the papers!' choked Jack. '"Gallant conduct on the part of John Norman, Esquire." You villain, you! you've defrauded me of my rights! I'll never forgive you!'

'I'll never forgive you, if you don't shut up with your confounded nonsense!' said Ross savagely. 'Come and feel for that fool of a candle; and stop that row!'

'Confusion worse confounded!' groaned Jack, rolling from the couch to the floor. 'It's no use, Ross! I'm a gone 'coon! I've lost the use of my limbs! I've got suppressed laughter on the brain! I feel as if I should burst!'

Striking a match, with hands still trembling from the shock, Ross re-lighted the candle.

'When you've finished all that tomfoolery, perhaps you will go back to bed,' he said, with suppressed irritation and anger.

Something in the tone sobered Jack. Springing to his feet, he looked anxiously in his brother's face.

'I say, old fellow, it never struck me! Are you ill, or what? That's the brandy bottle, isn't it?'

'Yes; I turned faint. Now you need not go telling the Mater; just keep it quiet, will you?'

'Quiet as the grave!' replied Jack, almost choking with his efforts to keep back the suppressed laughter. He saw that Ross's feelings were really hurt, and struggled hard to regain his gravity. But it was an intense relief to find himself alone in his own bedroom, where, hiding his head under the clothes, he once more exploded, and laughed as he had not laughed for many a day. He found no difficulty in going to sleep after that.

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His face burning with annoyance and mortification, Ross went back to his room and shut the door. Not quite conscious of what he was doing, he poured out a glass of brandy and water, and eagerly drank it off. Then turning to his books he tried to forget the events of the past half-hour; but tried in vain. Jack's laughter kept ringing in his ears.

He had not intended to take the bottle of brandy back to his room, but to pour out a small quantity into a little bottle, which he had put in his pocket for that purpose. In the hurry and agitation caused by Jack's unexpected appearance on the scene, he had forgotten this, and now the presence of the large bottle in his room brought a fresh complication. How was he to account for it to his mother without betraying himself? A quick-witted boy would instantly have seen the way out of the difficulty; but in his present state Ross was not quick-witted, and it never struck him that it would be easy to restore the bottle to its place before it could possibly be missed.

The problem of its disposal distracted his attention from study till, wearied out, he gave up in despair and went to bed. The next morning his brain was clearer, and, wondering at his own stupidity, he replaced the bottle early, and tried to dismiss the subject. Jack made no allusion to it. He thought it very easy of solution. Ross had felt ill, and, in his natural reticence, being desirous to keep it quiet, had crept down-stairs for a restorative. Simple enough, and true, and Jack was not the one to betray confidence.

But the step taken involved more than Ross or Jack dreamed of. Fearful of being again discovered in like circumstances, Ross once more opened up an account with Frank, and after dark that evening stole out into the shrubbery to receive a paper parcel, resembling in shape anything rather than a bottle. A bottle it was, nevertheless, and, with a feeling akin to exultation, he put it carefully away in his cupboard.

He had no intention of returning to his former practice—his only motive was to have a restorative at hand if he felt ill. But he miscalculated his own strength. For some nights he successfully withstood what became each time a stronger

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temptation. To know that the coveted stimulant was within reach, when head and heart failed, and not to avail himself of it, required a degree of moral courage which he did not possess. Clever, brilliant, and high-principled, he failed here —he was deficient in moral courage.

But he did not give way without a struggle. In a certain sense, he felt bound in honour to Dr. Burton, and though he was not now under medical supervision, there was an uncomfortable consciousness of being, as it were, *en parole* in this matter.

The temptation became at length irresistible; and, finding it impossible to do even his minimum quantity of work without some aid, he sought, and found it in his favourite stimulant. An old habit once resumed soon doubles its power, and in a few weeks Ross was more surely its captive than ever he had been.

But he was more cautious now. The moment the clock struck twelve, down went his pen or book, and off he went to bed. He also observed carefully certain laws of health which he had formerly neglected. He forced himself to eat—even the obnoxious mutton chops! and took as much exercise as he could force himself to endure. This was in his favour, and he managed to elude detection. But his strength was running down, and he knew it—it made him desperate.

'Only let me win the Rutland,' he said to himself, 'and I will rest and get my *strength*. But I must have the Rutland! I *will* have it!'

If determination and perseverance could win it, he was, indeed, sure of it. Everything else sank before this one great object of his ambition, which absorbed and concentrated every energy.

He did not, however, forget his little friend at the Cedars. Every day, without fail, the pigeon fluttered its wings against the window, and was taken in by one of the boys. A note, generally written by Cecile herself, nestled among the soft feathers, and Ross was never too busy to send an answer.

Cecile was growing weaker. The bright spring days, on which her mother had built so many hopes, came, but brought no change for the better. Mr. Harborough alone seemed blind to what was going on. He seldom saw Cecile, for nearly all

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her time was spent in the little sitting-room up-stairs. Occasionally, when she felt equal to the effort, she would go down and lie on the couch in the drawing-room while they were at dinner; and it sometimes happened that her father came in afterwards, and sat for a little while in moody silence before returning to his beloved bottle. But he rarely took much notice of her. He would ask her why she had not been in to dinner, and scowl when she said she had had her dinner early. Sometimes he would tell her mother that she was ruining the child with her idiotic molly-coddling; that there was nothing the matter with her but laziness and affectation, of which she ought to be broken. But though he spoke in this rough, harsh way, he did not attempt to enforce his suggested treatment, and Cecile was left in peace. She and Clarice had lived in daily hope that he would withdraw his prohibition and allow them once more to visit Northland, but he had taken an unaccountable dislike to the Normans, and did not hesitate to express it freely, so that at last they gave up hope.

From their window they had a view of the bend of the road, and every day the boys on their way to and from school looked up and signalled greeting and good wishes. It was a break in their monotonous day, and told them they were not quite forgotten by the outside world.

It began to look a very outside world to them. Shut up in the house, they saw and heard so little of what was going on. Ross and Jack kept them well up in school news, and occasionally Clarice went to spend the evening with Grace and Dora, or Mona, and heard various interesting items of news, all of which were retailed for Cecile's benefit. But people scarcely ever went to the house. Those who did venture were received without welcome, for Mrs. Harborough shrank from the prying eyes of a curious world. She knew that she and her children were objects of Eastdale pity and commiseration; and her proud, sensitive spirit recoiled from such questionable notoriety. Even the little influence she had hitherto had over her husband was disappearing, and her wishes were as nothing to him. He ignored or insulted her on every possible occasion, and she strove to hide all outward sign of a despairing and almost broken heart. For her children's sake alone

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she tried to speak cheerfully and build bright hopes of the future; but they were not to be deceived. Many were the tears shed at night, as they lay listening for their father's footsteps, and wondering if the time would ever come when they would not dread his return.

Absorbed as he was in his studies, Ross did not notice the change that was coming over Frank Harley. The merry, sunny-tempered boy was fast becoming quiet and grave, and had an unusual anxious look in his restless eyes. Jack noticed it, and spoke to Ross.

'Is anything up with Frank?' he asked. 'I can't think what's come to the fellow. He looks like an undertaker's mute.'

'What is the matter with him?' said Ross absently.

'Just what I should like to know. He isn't going off in a decline, is he?—he looks interesting.'

'Are mutes interesting? He is in some trouble at home perhaps.'

'Harley pater is a queer customer, they say; he drinks like a fish, I know. I say, Ross,' and Jack lowered his voice, 'whom do you think I saw coming out of Hickory's the other night, reeling like an expiring top?'

'I don't know; not Parker?'

'Yes; himself. He was as drunk as drunk could be! Wouldn't the Doctor open his eyes if he knew? He—Parker—came to grief at the corner by the signpost, and down he went like a log!'

'Beast!' said Ross, with ineffable contempt. 'You never go to Hickory's now, do you, Jack?'

'Not I, forsooth! I promised Dr. Winslow I'd never go again, and a fellow must keep his word, I suppose. Much good it does me, though. I might be the biggest blackguard in the school by the way I'm treated,' said Jack crossly.

There were times when he thought the Doctor very hard upon him. Knowing the facts of the whole case, he did not fully realize how it all looked from the Doctor's standpoint, and was apt to think himself ill-used. He had no idea that Dr. Winslow was daily waiting and expecting him to express regret for not only breaking the rules, but for afterwards

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denying it with such apparently stubborn indifference to truth and right.

Poor Jack had no intention whatever of ever referring to the distasteful subject, deeming it luckily buried in the oblivion of the past. That an apology and certain degree of repentance were expected from him never once entered into his head.

Frank was pursuing his way home in solitude, when he heard Ross behind him, and stopped.

'I am sorry to bother you, Norman, but if you could pay for those last bottles I should be awfully glad,' he said.

There was something so unusual in his tone that, roused as he was by Jack's words, Ross noticed it, and looked curiously at him.

'Is anything the matter, Frank?'

Frank coloured, and for the moment seemed to resent the question. Meeting Ross's sympathizing eyes, he turned his head away hastily, but not before Ross had seen the change of expression.

'Don't mind me, old fellow. If there's anything I can do'—

'But there isn't,' interrupted Frank. 'No one can do anything.' He spoke hurriedly, as if ashamed of the quiver in his voice. They walked on in silence; Ross did not know what to say, though he wanted to assure Frank of his goodwill and sympathy in the trouble, whatever it might be. While he was trying to frame some sentence which would express this without appearing obtrusive, Frank spoke again.

'What sort of a fellow was your father, Norman?'

Ross stared. 'My father? In what way do you mean?'

'Was he—do you remember him?'

'Yes; perfectly well.'

'I mean, did he drink?' said Frank, in some confusion. 'Was he what they call a hard drinker?'

'Certainly not!' replied Ross, with indignation. 'Who has been talking about him, I should like to know?'

'No one; I only wanted to know. I was wondering what you would do.'

'I don't know what you mean. What I would do, if what?'

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'If you saw everything going to ruin because your father cared for nothing but drink,' said Frank bitterly.

'Is that it, Frank?' said Ross, under his breath.

Frank nodded.

'Not so bad as that, is it?' said Ross, after a long pause. 'He has such a good business, Frank. See how well known he is.'

'It was a good business once—it isn't now. You know King, the fellow who's been in the shop for years. Last month we had a most tremendous row. He's been cheating my father up hill and down dale ever since he's been with us. I have distrusted him a long time, but couldn't get my father to believe any harm of him. It came out by some fluke, and off he went; but we found a pretty state of things after he'd gone; for see, Norman, it doesn't do for a business man to leave his affairs entirely to any one. He ought to keep his eye on everything.'

'Of course,' said Ross, who knew as much about business as he did of ostrich-farming. 'What did your father say when he found it out?'

'More than I should care to repeat. We had an awful time at home,' and Frank sank his voice. 'I might as well tell you all now, Norman, since I've said so much. The fact is, my father has drunk himself into a state of care-nothing-for-nobody, and just lets the business drag on as it likes. He scarcely ever goes into the shop; that fool of a Lake has it all his own way there, and knows no more about business than my little sisters! Mother does what she can; but that is not much. What are we to do?'

'Can't you send Lake away and get a competent manager instead?' suggested Ross.

Frank shook his head. 'Who is to do it? Father won't let Lake go; he likes him. I can't take it on myself to send him off; there would be a nice row. No; there is only one thing that I can see: I must leave school at midsummer and go into the shop.'

'Why, I thought you had made up your mind to be an architect!' said Ross, aghast at this sudden change in Frank's prospects.

'Oh, bother!' groaned Frank; 'what on earth is the use of

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making up your mind to anything in this world? something is sure to unmake it for you. I hate the shop, Norman, and if I have to take it up for the sake of mother and the children, it will just spoil my life.'

'I am awfully sorry, Frank,' said Ross sympathetically. 'I wish I could help you, old fellow.'

'I am the only boy, you see,' went on Frank; 'that's the rub. I wish Rose were a boy; she's a sharp child, and might be of some use then.'

'That is that merry, curly-haired little girl who waylays you on your way home from school? She looks bright. I say, Frank, perhaps if some one spoke to your father it might be of some use. It is a shame for all your future prospects to be spoilt!'

Ross spoke with feeling, for he could thoroughly understand poor Frank's intense disappointment.

'Not a bit of use,' replied Frank dejectedly. 'He wouldn't take advice or expostulation, or anything of that sort; not he! I wouldn't set a foot in the old shop if it were not for mother and the little ones; that I wouldn't! Beastly hole!'

'Have you quite made up your mind? It does seem such a pity.'

'It is more than a pity! it's a burning shame! Fancy a man standing in his own son's light like that. He had no business to have a son, and that's a fact.'

'And what does your mother say?'

'What can she say? She wants me to stay at school another year, till I am seventeen, and then go into cousin Hargreaves' office. He has offered to take me without any premium. But what is the good of waiting? Either I must set to work and keep the business together, or it will be a case of bankruptcy and the workhouse. There's no choice.'

'I am awfully sorry,' repeated Ross.

It was all he could say, for there seemed no suggestion to be made in such a case.

'One thing my father does condescend to look after,' said Frank bitterly; 'he has been on the look-out ever since that affair about your bill, and keeps his eyes on the wine and spirit department. If ever I take a bottle of wine or cherry

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brandy away he is down on me like blazes, and I have to pay up at once.'

'What have you done about mine, then?' asked Ross anxiously.

'Paid for it—the last but one—out of my own pocket. He has been at me for what I brought you the other night, and I haven't a farthing, or I wouldn't bother you, Norman.'

'It's all right. I'll see about it,' said Ross. 'Do you want it to-night, Frank?'

'Well, I told him I'd try to pay up to-night,' was the reluctant reply. 'He is such a Tartar when he's put out, Norman, that for mother's sake I try to keep him quiet. Of course what I've told you is just between ourselves. I don't go talking about my family concerns all over the town.'

'All right; I shall not mention it, Frank; you may depend on me. I only hope something will turn up to keep you out of the shop. There is never any telling what will happen, is there?'

Frank shrugged his shoulders disconsolately, and with a gloomy look on his face turned off toward his home.

Ross went on ruminating. Since his illness he had been trying to save his pocket-money for the purpose of redeeming his father's chain and ring. With the exception of his secret purchase from Frank, he had successfully withstood all tempta tion, and his private fund was slowly increasing. At times he despaired of ever regaining his pledged property; but a timely gift from his mother would renew hope, and send him back to work with increased spirit and zest.

He had now the exact sum necessary to redeem the chain and ring. The candlesticks were of minor importance; he did not trouble much about them; but he was most anxious to once more possess his father's things.

He went to his secret store and reluctantly took out the amount due to Frank. It went to his heart to do it, for he had a true boy's reverence for all belonging to his dead father, and nothing short of what seemed an urgent necessity would have induced him to part with things he had handled and worn.

Already the term allowed by law had elapsed for the chain, and Mrs. Balls was at liberty to sell it. But she had not done

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so for fear of detection. Frank had threatened her with heavy penalties if it were not forthcoming on application. Still Ross was feeling anxious about it. He knew the woman's character, and distrusted her protestations. If she saw her way clear to selling them, sell them she would, and in no legal or orthodox way. Of this he was fully aware.

No wonder, then, that he was tremblingly anxious to regain possession of his treasures, and that his heart sank as he sat looking at his diminished hoard.

'There is only one thing for it. I must strain every nerve to study, keep as free from expense as is possible, and save till I can redeem them all; and then catch me in your clutches again, Mother Balls!' he thought as he went out to meet Frank. 'I've made some good resolutions in my time, but they are hard to keep. I'll keep this if I live.'

Words easily spoken.

Late that night, after the clocks had struck twelve, Jack, twisting from side to side in sleepless restlessness, heard a noise in Ross's room. Remembering his late adventure, he listened for the sound of footsteps in the passage or on the stairs.

'I expect he's ill again,' he thought, half jumping out of bed. 'He is such a queer fellow; he'd rather die than let any one know he was ill.'

Half inclined to open the door and waylay him, he sat on the edge of the bed listening. But no further sound broke the silence, and he was about to settle down again, when a smell of burning, so slight as to be almost imperceptible, attracted his attention. He sat up again and sniffed.

'It certainly is smoke,' he thought, feeling rather uneasy. 'I hope the house isn't on fire.'

Then, Jack-like, he went, in imagination, over every room in the house, trying to picture the best means of escape from each in case of a fire. As he was mentally tying sheets by which to lower Maggie out of the window, such an unmistakable puff of smoke saluted his somewhat fastidious nose that he sprang out of bed and rushed to the door, half expecting, as he threw it open, to see the passage in flames.

There was nothing, however, but a stronger smell of burn-

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ing, and thicker puffs of smoke coming from the direction of Ross's room.

'The duffer's gone and set fire to the house!' he said aghast. 'Here's a nice mess.'

He dashed up the passage and seized the handle of the door and shook it.

'Ross! Ross! open the door!' he cried through the keyhole, smothering his voice for fear of waking the household. 'I say, Ross, let me in, there's a good fellow!'

There was no reply, and he began to feel frightened. Smoke was curling up from between the door and the floor, and a puff through the keyhole made him choke and cough.

'He's asleep, or smothered,' he said to himself. 'Here goes then!'

The passage was narrow just there, and none of the Northland locks were famous for strength. Jack's limbs were. Setting his back against the opposite wall, he raised his foot, and with one vigorous kick stove the door in.

The room was full of smoke, and for a moment he gasped for breath. There was no time to be lost. Recovering his self-possession, he dashed through the smoke and flung open the window.

Looking round, he saw the light of flames creeping up the curtains of the bed. Fortunately they were made of thick, heavy material, and smouldered rather than burnt quickly, and gave more smoke than flame.

Springing on the bed, regardless of the dark figure lying across it, he tore down the drapery and flung it on the floor.

It did not take long to pour the contents of the ewer down the one burning post, and then, feeling Ross move, he lighted the gas and stared at him.

'What is—the matter?' said Ross, in a slow dazed way which dismayed Jack.

'Matter enough! How did you do it? What in the world have you been doing?'

'I've been asleep,' said Ross vaguely, staring round with bewildered eyes. 'I don't understand. What is it all about? What's burning?'

'You would have been if I hadn't come just in time,'

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replied Jack, dragging the carpet over the smouldering heap of drapery, and stamping on it. 'How did it happen?'

'I don't know.'

'Umph! I expect you have been fainting,' said Jack suspiciously. 'But how could you set the curtains on fire? The gas is on the other side of the room. What's this?'

He stooped and picked up a little brass candlestick, which had evidently rolled from the table by the bedside.

'You have been reading in bed, Ross.'

'I couldn't sit up; I was obliged to lie down; and the gas is too far off to read by.'

Jack's roving eyes fell on the table. His first thought, on seeing a glass containing a small quantity of brandy and water, was one of congratulation.

'Hallo, old fellow,' he cried, seizing it, 'the very thing! Drink this and you'll be all right. I expect you are almost smothered and choked to death.'

'Yes,' muttered Ross, staggering to his feet; 'it is the smoke that makes me feel queer. I was all right just now. I can't remember what happened.'

His voice was thick, and his eyes had that curious look which had first alarmed Jack. His hands, too, trembled violently, and he could scarcely hold the glass.

'I tell you what it is, old fellow,' said Jack, watching him: 'you are ill!'

'No, I am not! what do you mean? Can't a fellow go to sleep without being ill?' was the irritable reply. He said 'shleep,' and could only get the words out with difficulty.

A horrible thought came over Jack. Could it be that Ross was under the influence of drink? He knew the signs well enough, and the thick voice and strange look bore suspicious resemblance to them.

'You had better go and lie down in my bed,' he said, after a painful pause. 'I'll stay and see the fire out. We don't want to wake the house till morning.'

'Not till morning,' repeated Ross confusedly. He left the room, but would have stumbled in the passage had not Jack sprung forward and taken his arm.

'Lean on me,' he said.

He led him into his room, and saw him safely in bed,

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covering him up with a gentleness few would have given him the credit of possessing. Then closing the door, he went back to extinguish the smouldering remains of the fire.

The smoke had nearly cleared out, and after tossing the half-burnt curtains out upon the gravel he shut the window and sat down to survey the scene. Under the gas stood a table and desk strewed with papers and books. Ross had evidently been working there.

'I had better put them away at once,' he thought, rising. 'It won't do for the servants to touch them. They are sure to do some mischief.'

He was about to gather up the papers when his eye fell on something back in the shadow behind the desk. All his suspicions returned with redoubled force, and with a feeling very much akin to conviction he lifted a half-emptied brandy bottle to the light.

Everything was explained now—all the curious little inexplicable circumstances which had hitherto puzzled him! His brother's intense annoyance at being discovered at the sideboard that night; his persistence in keeping his door locked; his strange behaviour on one or two occasions when disturbed.

'I feel just like a detective!' said Jack, roughing up his hair in his dismay. 'Ross will never forgive me! What in the world will he say? I wish he'd kept his old bottles to himself! What am I to do with the thing?'

To leave it there, exposed to the prying eyes of the servants, who would surely find in it an explanation of the night's events, was not to be thought of. It must be hidden somewhere. Looking round the room, his eye fell on the cupboard by the fireplace, and he hastened to try the door.

'Oh, bother!' he muttered, finding it locked. 'This is where he keeps it, I suppose. Wonder where the key is!'

It was lying on the desk where Ross had put it before he had succumbed to the influence of the stimulant. Finding it, Jack opened the door, and, hastily putting in the bottle, locked it, though not without catching a glimpse of some more bottles at the back.

Angry with himself for that one momentary glimpse, which had been involuntary on his part, he went back to the

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table, and, taking the glass which still stood there, washed it out and placed it on the stand outside the door.

Having done his utmost to shield Ross from discovery, he went to his own room and got into bed. He was shivering with cold, and felt too worried to sleep. Ross lay by his side, sleeping heavily, and he lay still and listened to his uneasy breathing, and wondered what he would say when he awoke.

'Ross—our Ross the worse for drink!' he repeated to himself, in utter bewilderment. 'What can he be thinking of? It's that confounded Rutland! He is just mad to get it, and takes the stuff to keep him up to the mark. What *can* I do?'

A difficult question to answer. He lay pondering it over till morning, feeling more perplexed and wretched than he ever remembered doing before. To betray Ross was impossible, and yet how could he quietly look on and see him, day by day, ruining his health, both physically and morally, and say nothing?

The moral degradation was more to Jack than the physical failure; he felt keenly the disgrace involved, and shrank with positive pain from the mere possibility of its becoming known. He grew hot as he pictured the contempt, scorn, disappointment, and intense surprise which would fall upon Ross, the gratified malice of Parker, Gilthorn, and their set, the wonder of those too well disposed to be pleased, and the sorrow of those who loved him.

What would Mona think of her hero? What a fall for all their proud hopes!

'Of course, I know he has only taken it as a sort of medicine,' he thought; 'but the liking for it grows just the same as if it were taken merely as a drink. He must be well used to it; it is no sudden thing, that I'm pretty sure of. But where has he got the stuff?'

His thoughts flew to Frank with sudden enlightenment.

'Oh! ah! that's it, is it?' he said to himself. 'I see it all now, Master Frank. You have kept him supplied with the needful. What a confounded shame!'

He felt very indignant with Frank, not considering how small was his share of blame. But it was a relief to find some one on whom to vent his anger and wrath.

As soon as he heard the servants moving he dressed and

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went down, leaving Ross still sleeping. In a few minutes Maggie came flying down, full of excitement, with the story of a great heap of something on the gravel walk below Ross's window. Jack shrugged his shoulders, and told her to go and fetch it in. She went and danced round it in an ecstasy of astonished wonderment, and then rushed up to her mother with the news that Ross's curtains were all on fire.

Poor Mrs. Norman, frightened out of her senses, ran into her son's room, and, seeing the condition of things, thought nothing less than that Ross was dead. Jack ran up to reassure her, and explain how it had all happened.

Attracted by the noise, Aleck appeared upon the scene, and opened his eyes wide as he gazed round. He could scarcely believe Jack's account.

'All that noise, and I not hear it!' he exclaimed. 'Nonsense, Jack! you've been dreaming. Kick the door open, indeed!'

'Look at the door,' was Jack's conclusive answer.

Mrs. Norman hurried off to Jack's room, and found Ross just waking. He looked wretchedly ill, and answered her anxious questions with nervous irritability.

He had fallen asleep on the bed, and the candle must have fallen and set fire to the curtains. That was all he knew about.

'But what did you want with a candle?' cried Maggie, staring at him with open-mouthed wonder. 'There's the gas.'

'There's the door,' replied Ross suggestively, and Maggie withdrew with a defiant glance from her grey eyes.

Jack felt like a culprit. All breakfast time he rattled on, trying to cover Ross's preoccupied silence, and dreading the inevitable walk to school with him. What was he to say concerning the events of the past night? It was a relief to find Aleck waiting to walk down with them as far as his office; and there Longman joined them, and the evil hour was put off.

However, they both knew it must come, and Ross, on his side, was anxious to speak. He could not understand why Jack shunned him, for he had a very misty recollection of what had taken place, and had not the slightest idea that his

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secret was known. It had slipped his memory entirely that he had forgotten to replace the bottle in its hiding-place, and having found the key of the cupboard in his desk he had never given the matter a thought.

He hurried out of school and overtook Jack half-way home.

'What a rate you have come!' he panted, flushed with running. 'I want you to tell me about last night, Jack. Begin at the beginning; I forget what happened.'

'I'm tired of telling!' said Jack crossly. 'I've told the story half a dozen times already.'

'Tell it the seventh time and have done with it. What made you suspect anything—the smoke? Well, what was I doing?'

'Lying on the bed,' replied Jack concisely.

'What did I say? Did I seem stupid when I awoke?' asked Ross, with ill-concealed anxiety, looking furtively at his brother.

'Rather.'

'What did I say and do?'

'Only that you had been asleep,' said Jack reluctantly.

'You gave me something to drink,—some brandy,—didn't you?' went on Ross, with assumed indifference. 'You were pretty quick in fetching it.'

Jack darted a keen, inquiring look at him. He was not slow of comprehension, and saw his tactics: he was trying to find out how much he knew.

For the moment the temptation was strong to pretend to know nothing; but in that case, what power would he have to try and prevent Ross from again yielding to temptation and falling into what seemed to him such horrible disgrace?

'I did not fetch it,' he said, in a low voice; 'it was there on the table.'

'Was it? Oh yes, I remember! I took some before I fell asleep; I felt so ill and faint. I suppose I did not take it all?'

Not one word about the store in the cupboard.

'Surely he must wonder what I think about it,' pondered Jack. 'He can't suppose that I put that bottle back and saw those others without having some opinion on the subject.'

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Then the thought struck him that perhaps he knew nothing about the discovery of his secret store; that he had quite forgotten that he had left the bottle out on the table. This view was confirmed by his next words.

'I am obliged to keep a few drops of brandy by me in case I turn faint at night. I can't always go down-stairs, as I did that night when you came down like a wolf on the fold!'

'Of course not,' said Jack absently.

He could not force himself to say anything more on the subject; and with evident relief Ross changed the conversation.

At the corner of the road by the Cedars they looked up as usual, expecting to see Clarice and Cecile at the window. But no one was visible.

'I wonder if Cecile is worse,' said Ross uneasily, as, after lingering some moments, they passed on. 'It is so unusual not to see either of them at the window. Little Dot will tell us.'

Dot was the pigeon, which generally made its appearance a short time after the boys' return from school. But though they both watched for it that day, it did not come. The next day passed, and still the little messenger did not ask admittance at the dining-room window. Jack questioned the servants. Had they heard anything about Miss Cecile?

Briggs had applied for and obtained a place as under gardener at the Cedars. From him Jane heard daily accounts of Mr. Harborough's proceedings, and nothing pleased her better than to retail them to Jack, accompanying her narrative with denunciations and dark threats of what she would do were she in Mrs. Harborough's place.

But it was not often Jack indulged her. Now that he was anxious about Cecile, he went and asked her if she knew anything, and that opened the flood-gates of Jane's wrath.

'I only hope he hasn't killed her, that's all, Master Jack!' she said, shaking her broom vigorously (Jack supposed at an imaginary Mr. Harborough). 'He's going the way to do it—the old wretch! George says he's been at it ever since the night before last—drink, drink, drink! He would make his poor wife and Miss Clarice sit in the dining-room with him, and wanted to have dear little Miss Cecile down too, only she

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was luckily asleep. He hasn't been out of the house for two days; just sits at home and drinks.'

Repeating this to Ross, Jack added, 'Jane had better look out on her own score. Briggs is too fond of his glass of beer now, and is in the right place for such a liking to be fostered. If I were a girl, I wouldn't marry a man who drank.'

'I suppose a man may drink in moderation,' replied Ross, with a swift look of inquiry. 'You are not going in for total abstinence, are you?'

'I don't know.'

Ross elevated his eyebrows. 'Only don't try to convert me—that's all.'

Jack made no reply. Apparently he was absorbed in his book; but another and a very different subject was occupying his attention. For the first time in his life it had struck him that, after all, total abstinence might have its advantages, even for a Norman.

What Jane had said was quite correct. Mr. Harborough was daily growing more morose and tyrannical. Nothing pleased him, and he kept the house in such continual turmoil that, one by one, the servants gave notice and left.

'If it weren't for master, ma'am,' said the cook respectfully, —'if it weren't for the constant rows, and flinging about of things, and calling of names, I wouldn't leave indeed. But master's one too many for me; and that's the simple truth, ma'am. I love the young ladies, and would do anything for poor dear little Miss Cecile, who's going to a better world, sure enough, where her pa can't worry her, and bring the tears to her pretty eyes ever any more.'

And, quite touched by the pathetic picture, she burst out crying, and left the room. She really was a faithful, affectionate woman, much attached to her mistress and the little girls, and they felt the parting, especially coming from such a cause, deeply.

But new servants came in, filling up the vacant places; and for a time things would go on more quietly. Then Mr. Harborough would again break out into his senseless rages, and there would be another general exodus.

Dr. Burton paid his little patient frequent visits. True, Mr. Harborough had more than once declared savagely that

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he would not have the meddling old fool in his house; but as he did not formally forbid the visits they were continued.

Not unfrequently the two, who had once been dear old friends, met, and with a scowl Mr. Harborough would mutter unintelligible words, and turn into the nearest room to avoid further conversation. Especially he hated and dreaded the doctor's quiet question—'How do you feel to-day?' with the accent strong on the *you*.

To Mrs. Harborough's dismay he took a dislike to solitude, and insisted upon her spending the greater part of each evening with him. Clarice used to creep up to Cecile; but the loving, timid child generally sent her down again, fearing to leave her mother alone with such a madman as Mr. Harborough had proved himself to be when intoxicated.

What the sensitive, gentle child suffered, when left up-stairs, with only the company of her own thoughts, none knew. She struggled bravely to hide her fear and loneliness, and show a cheerful face when at last her mother and sister came up released from their prison!

But the strain was telling on her fragile frame. Sometimes the solitude became unbearable, and she was obliged to summon one of the maids to sit with her. But they were all new, and unused to the surroundings, and could only sit and stare at her. She preferred to be alone when she could bear it.

One night the house seemed unusually weird and lonesome. Not a sound could be heard from below, and she listened in vain for even the ticking of the great clock on the staircase. At last she began to imagine sounds, and this was worse than the dead silence. Steps on the stairs, rustling dresses down the corridor, sighs and whispers in all directions, and ghostly murmurs. Her heart beat fast with fear, and a sudden bang in the room below sent every vestige of colour from her lips. The servants were out, most of them, and she shrank from the prying eyes of the new housemaid who had last answered her bell.

Slipping off her couch, she wrapped her white shawl tightly round her, and stole out on the landing. Not a sound was to be heard save the wind moaning round the house, and the rain beating gently against the windows. Softly she crept

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down the wide staircase, holding on to the balustrades with trembling hand. At the bottom she stopped again and listened: still silence.

Sitting down on the lowest step, she folded her shawl over her head, and sat motionless. The dining-room door was close to her, and presently she heard the clink and jingle of glass and bottle. Then her father spoke.

'A nice companionable wife and daughter I am blessed with!' he said, in the thick, sarcastic tone which was only too familiar to the listener—familiar and hateful. 'Have you lost the use of your tongue too, Clarice? Your mother has entertained a dumb spirit for many years; haven't you, my dear?'

'I shall be very pleased to talk, Robert, if you wish it,' was the gentle reply.

'Umph! Then talk.'

Then Mrs. Harborough's low voice made one or two remarks, and Cecile dropped her shawl to hear more clearly. Great tears rose to her eyes and rolled slowly down her face as she heard the quiver of her mother's voice, and with a choking sob she leaned against the balustrades, feeling a sudden faintness.

For some time Mr. Harborough was quiet, and a drowsiness was creeping over her, when his voice again startled her into consciousness. He was in one of his worst moods, that of semi-intoxicated savageness. At this stage—that of semi-intoxication—many men become maudlin and idiotic. Mr. Harborough invariably became brutal.

Cecile shivered and trembled as his sneering laugh and cruel words grew more and more frequent. She knew what they were to her mother and Clarice. A wild longing to get away from the sound of his voice for ever—to fly from all possibility of his touch and presence—came over her, and dropping her head upon her hands she burst into choked hysterical sobs.

'I wish I could die! I wish I could die!' she moaned. 'Why does God let him be so cruel! If only we could die and get away from him!'

Half an hour later, Clarice, stealing from the room, found her asleep on the stairs, with the white shawl folded round her head.

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Frightened at the sight, and thinking she was fainting, she went back and told her mother. In quick alarm she rose, forgetting even her husband's dreaded wrath. For a wonder he took no notice of her departure, and she went out and took Cecile in her arms. She carried her up-stairs to bed, and sat by her all that night, holding the little hot hand in hers; while down-stairs, the father sat drinking till dawn, and then staggered to bed, to sleep, or toss in restless disquiet, as it happened.

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CHAPTER VI.

'IT IS GOING TO BE THE CURSE OF OUR FAMILY.'

THE warm bright days of summer were drawing near, and the grammar school boys began to make arrangements for long excursions over moor and fen. Every half-holiday parties of them started off, some with hammers and other geological implements, others with pocket lens and tin case for botanical specimens, some with yellow-covered novels hidden away in their pockets, and furtive cigars or short, rowdy-looking pipes keeping them company.

Jack had an entomological craze, and went on his travels equipped with tin boxes and bottles, and generally returned laden with frightful-looking beetles, huge moths, and insects of all sorts. At this period Maggie utterly declined to enter his room. Next to rats, beetles were her abomination.

Strangely enough, this dislike was shared by Ross, and was nearly the only feeling he had in common with his little sister. He hated the very sight of the crawling things, and the touch of one made him shudder, or, as Maggie put it, 'creep' all over.

Utterly incomprehensible as this was to Jack, he took every care to prevent the escape of his ugly pets or specimens. One day he brought home a number of lizards, of the sort commonly known as slow-worms, the *Angues fragiles*. To the unscientific eye they looked like snakes, and even Mrs. Norman exclaimed against their introduction into the house.

Jack took up the cudgels for his new favourites, and installed them in safety in a box in his own private store

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and work-room. This was a small room at the end of the corridor in which were his and Ross's bedrooms. It was out of the way of the rest of the household, and Jack found it very convenient for many purposes.

About twelve o'clock that night Maggie woke up with a start of horror. Something was moving on her pillow! In a moment the thought of those hated lizards flashed across her mind, and with a shiver of fear she sprang out of bed.

It was some time before she could summon up sufficient courage to look for the obnoxious intruders, but she could find nothing. It must have been a dream.

Still she could not rest. In imagination she saw the whole colony of lizards, accompanied by the many-legged beetles, on their wriggling way down the corridor, and at last she wrought herself up to such a pitch of nervous excitement that she could not rest till she had seen for herself that the door of Jack's work-room was really and truly shut.

Many children would have hesitated before leaving their room in the dead of night, and traversing the quiet passages, but she was far above that sort of fear. Lighting her candle, she set out on her travels, keeping a sharp look-out as she went, and treading gingerly on tiptoe to avoid the unpleasant sensation consequent on the smashing of some unlucky beetle.

However, her fears were in vain. Not only was Jack's door shut, but not a trace could she see of lizard or beetle. As she retraced her steps, feeling a comfortable satisfaction at her own exploit, Ross's door was suddenly flung open, and he stood before her, shaking with wrath and excitement.

'You little wretch! you mean little eavesdropper!' he muttered under his breath; 'how dare you come prying and listening at my door? I will teach you to spy on me!'

Putting both hands on her shoulders, he shook her in his rage. Maggie was silent from sheer astonishment at first, but the shaking roused her temper.

'Leave me alone! How dare you touch me, you great big coward?' she exclaimed. 'I was not listening or spying! What should I spy for? What are you doing that you are so afraid of being seen?'

'You wicked little liar!' said Ross, beside himself with

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various emotions; 'what are you doing here if you are not spying? Going to see the lizards, I suppose! That will be the next lie!'

'I'm not a liar!' retorted Maggie furiously. Her defiant grey eyes were lifted to his, when suddenly she saw something which checked the rush of words. What it was she could not actually define,—a strange, unusual expression, a gleam of something more than mere anger in his eyes. It held her, for the moment, speechless.

'Why do you look like that? What are you staring at, you little idiot?' he whispered hoarsely.

'Hallo! What's up?'

The interruption came from Jack, who, roused by the sound of voices, had slipped on his dressing-gown and opened his door. He stood still in perfect amazement, staring at the two before him.

'Are the lizards out?' was the question which naturally presented itself. He could imagine no other cause for the unheard-of phenomenon before him. Maggie and Ross quarrelling in the corridor in the middle of the night! He might well stare.

'No,' said Maggie, feeling inclined to cry, but prevented by her pride. 'I thought they were, and Ross says I was listening! Leave me alone, Ross!'

She wrenched herself out of his grasp, and took refuge with Jack.

'Go to bed,' he said quickly. 'Go, Maggie, there's a good child. I'll make it right with Ross.'

'What is the matter with him?' she whispered, as Ross turned to re-enter his room, and half stumbled on the threshold.

'Nothing!' was the sharp reply. 'What should be the matter? Go to bed at once; you'll catch your death of cold here.'

With a parting glance of defiance at Ross, she disappeared round the corner like a little white ghost. Jack watched her out of sight, and then turned to Ross.

'What was she doing here?' he asked, following him into his room.

'Spying on me, of course!'

'But what for?' persisted Jack, not seeing any reason for

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such a proceeding. 'Besides, she isn't like that—mean and prying. I don't believe she was listening. Were you in bed?'

He glanced round, taking in various details, among them a glass and bottle on the table under the gas. Ross had given up reading in bed since the fire.

'I was just going. It's of no consequence! I mean'—stammered Ross. 'What are you waiting for?'

Jack felt his face turn white. 'Hadn't you better go to bed?' he asked, in a low voice. 'I will put out the gas.'

Muttering some inarticulate words, Ross sat down at his desk. Evidently he was making an effort to hide his condition from Jack's quick eyes. But it was too late.

'You must go to bed, Ross,' said Jack decisively. 'You will be ill if you don't.'

He put his hand on his shoulder persuasively, but Ross flung it off with a furious exclamation.

'Can't you leave a fellow alone? You are as bad as Maggie, with your miserable, contemptible prying! Mind your own business, and leave me to mind mine!'

This from quiet, dignified Ross! Jack could scarcely believe the evidence of his own senses. In sore bewilderment he stood, uncertain as to what he ought to do. It was a great temptation to go and fetch Aleck, but this savoured so much of treachery to Ross, that he was forced, though reluctantly, to abandon the idea.

'I don't want to interfere,' he said. 'I hate you to think I am spying or prying, Ross; but you are not fit for study, and must go to bed, or you will be ill. Dr. Burton will soon put a stop to night-study if you fall into his hands again.'

'Do you dare to threaten me?' cried poor Ross, lifting his angry, flushed face. 'I suppose you mean to tell him, you mean sneak!'

He flung the words at Jack as if they were so many missiles.

Jack coloured deeply, and in a rush of momentary anger and indignation was about to leave the room, when a sudden change came over Ross.

'I beg your pardon, old fellow,' he said, holding out a trembling hand. 'I've been mad, I think! What did I say? Don't pay any attention, will you?'

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He looked up so imploringly that Jack's resentment all died away.

'Of course not! What are you thinking of?' he said, with an attempt at a laugh. 'Tumble into bed, and I'll put the gas out. You will be better for a good sleep.'

'Yes, yes; that is what I want,' said Ross confusedly. 'I shall be all right in the morning. You are a good fellow, Jack.'

He managed to get into bed, and then Jack left him and went back to his own room.

He lay staring at the window till the red rays of the sun announced dawn, and then fell asleep. He awoke with an uncomfortable consciousness of some undefined trouble, and it was several minutes before the events of the past night shaped themselves out of the chaos of his bewildered thoughts.

To his relief Maggie maintained a discreet silence respecting her midnight escapade. The fact was, the young lady was rather ashamed of her horror of beetles and snakes, and dreaded Jack's ridicule. If he were content to let the matter drop, so was she; but she looked daggers at Ross, who repaid them with a scowl.

In a most uncomfortable frame of mind, Jack started off for school. Ross walked by his side in silence, not knowing how to commence a conversation. That his brother was aware of his state the past night he knew well, and, though he felt compelled to speak about it and offer some explanation, he shrank from the task with shame.

Still the thing must be done, and screwing up his courage he stammered some half-coherent words about feeling ill and having the toothache.

Jack listened with a sorrowful sense of deception. Things must indeed have gone far to draw Ross into such ignoble deceit.

'Of course I saw what was up,' he said, with an effort. 'I could scarcely believe it, though. Ross, I would rather you lost the Rutland a thousand times than sink to *that!*'

This was the crisis Ross had foreseen and prepared for.

'Sink to what?' he asked, with feigned surprise. 'How could I help it if the confounded stuff got into my head? It wasn't my fault.'

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'Not your fault that you took too much?' said Jack, astonished at such a novel doctrine.

'But I did *not* take too much,' replied Ross angrily. 'You don't suppose I drink for the sake of drinking, do you? I only take a small quantity as medicine now and then. It took unusual effect on me last night, that is all.'

Jack made no reply. He was resolving in his own mind whether he had not better tell Ross that he knew of the existence of his secret store. Before he could decide, Tom Longman joined them, and the opportunity was gone.

'Come round to my house to-night, will you?' said Tom. 'Edgar has sent off my new cricket set, and they will be here by the seven-thirty train. Come round to supper, and have a look at them. Edgar says he has never handled such a splendid bat.'

The invitation was more tempting to Jack than to Ross, who did not care much for cricket. But they both accepted, and went. Ross was on his guard. Knowing that Jack was already roused to something very like suspicion, he scarcely touched the wine which sparkled so temptingly beside him. It required all his moral strength and courage to battle with what was really a terrible and almost irresistible temptation, terrible because of its power over him. Only one thing enabled him successfully to withstand it, the necessity for blinding his brother and running him off the track.

Little suspecting this, Jack noticed with satisfaction that the wine, good as it was, possessed small attraction for Ross, and the weight on his heart became lightened.

It never once occurred to him that Ross was acting a part. Upright and honourable himself, it would have needed strong evidence to convince him of any failure on his brother's part.

The conversation turned on the Rutland, and Tom, with his usual openness, told them of various bets made on the competitors.

'Parker swears by Crawford; declares he'd stake the whole of his fortune on the chance of his winning. He backs him to any extent. I don't believe it; Crawford's clever, and all that, but he has no genius.'

'Depends on what you call genius,' said Ross. 'He

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certainly has "an infinite capacity for taking pains," which is the popular definition just now, it seems to me.'

'That is all very well,' said Tom decidedly,—'the old tale of the hare and tortoise served up in another form. A lame man may have "an infinite capacity" for shuffling along, but I prefer legs.'

'So do I,' replied Ross, laughing. 'Parker would stake a larger amount to see me floored than to see Crawford successful.'

'I believe you! I say, have you heard of the row at Hickory's? Parker will get more than he bargains for one of these fine days.'

'What has he been doing?'

'He and Gilthorn and several more were at Hickory's the other night, going it full swing—brandy, tobacco, and cards—you know the style. Then Parker must needs begin to lord it over Gilthorn, because he owes him money, and of course Gilthorn hit him back, only with his fist instead of his tongue. They had a regular mill, and when Hickory interfered Parker turned on him and gave him a black eye. Hickory was furious, and swore he'd tell the Doctor and the magistrates and the town-crier—Mayor and Corporation too, I think!'

'How did it end?' asked Jack, sailing a walnut shell in his glass of untasted wine.

'Parker had to fork out a compensation (amount unknown). But he has been as black as a thundercloud ever since, and it is supposed Hickory took more than his pound of flesh. Where are you going, Jack?'

'It is later than I thought,' replied Jack, who had hastily risen. 'I have a good hour's work to do before I go to bed, so I must be off at once. Are you coming, Ross?'

'No; I will follow you soon. I am in no hurry to-night,' replied Ross, with apparent indifference but secret satisfaction.

Jack went off, and they heard his light-hearted whistle down the drive.

'Why, he hasn't touched his wine!' said Tom. 'What is the matter with him? Is he ill?'

'Not that I know of,' replied Ross, wondering if the

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untouched glass were left as a quiet hint to him. It made him feel uncomfortable, and at the same time roused his anger. What right had Jack to give *him* hints? He had far better mind his own business. He grew hot and defiant as he brooded over the supposed insult, for insult he chose to call it. Was he not old enough to look after his own affairs? How dare Jack interfere?

Meanwhile, unconscious of the storm he had raised by a single act, Jack hurried home. The leaving his wine untasted had been entirely the result of impulse, not premeditation. He had taken the glass in his hand at the last minute, intending to toss off the contents; but one glance at Ross had checked him, and he had put it down and turned away. Why he did so he did not quite comprehend, and he did not stop to analyse feelings and distinguish between cause and effect.

There was a general, undefined sense of danger to Ross in the glass, and a curious shrinking from it on his own part, not as a possible evil to himself. The feeling was more properly an instinctive, rather than a reasoning antagonism to his brother's enemy.

On his return home he found his mother and Aleck in close conversation. Their faces, perplexed and troubled as they were, could not fail to excite curiosity, and he looked from one to the other, a feeling of vague alarm creeping over him. Had they found out about Ross?

It had come to that now; there was a definite something to be found out.

'What's up?' he asked, in elegant schoolboy phraseology. 'You look like two unhappy jurymen kept without their dinner.'

'Domestic troubles, my dear,' said his mother, with a sigh. 'Nothing to trouble you with.'

'Oh, come, mother! that is not fair! If it is not too domestic for Aleck, it isn't for me. I'm as domestic as he is any day—more so,' replied Jack, throwing himself on the couch and laying his curly head on her lap.

'Tell us all your troubles, little mater!' he went on, stroking her hand caressingly. 'What is the use of a parcel of great big boys if they can't carry your bundle as well as their own?

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Out with the varmint, and Aleck and I will hunt him to the death. Where is he? In the kitchen?'

'I don't know; that is the puzzle! I feel so sure of Rebekah and Jane,' said Mrs. Norman, her face growing perplexed again. 'I am as certain of their honesty as of my own.'

'Well, what has happened to raise the question of any one's honesty? Somebody run off with the spoons and forks?'

'Not the spoons and forks; I wish that were it! Any vagrant might have watched their opportunity and taken them from the kitchen during the servants' absence. It is Aunt Rachel's silver candlesticks—Ross's candlesticks. I can't find them anywhere, and I am sure they were in that cupboard in my storeroom.'

'When did you see them last?' asked Jack.

'I can't quite remember. Not for months. I put them carefully away in wash-leather and some old handkerchiefs. I remember doing it most distinctly.'

'Are you quite sure you haven't put them somewhere else since—moved them, I mean,' suggested Jack after a pause. 'I can't see how they can be lost.'

'My dear, I have hunted in every imaginable place! They are not in the house,' said his mother decidedly. 'I would not lose them for a great deal; Ross thinks so much of them.'

'Only as curiosities. He does not really value them, ugly old things!'

'Yes, he does value them; he always did. They are not ugly, Jack, though they are old-fashioned; and they are massive silver, and worth a great deal.'

Jack was silent. Even his ingenious brain could offer no solution here.

'Is anything else gone?' he asked presently.

'No; not that I know of. I have not missed anything.'

'They must have been taken by some one who knows the house well,' said Aleck; 'no ordinary thief would know anything about the cupboard, or the candlesticks.'

'I don't believe Rebekah or Jane would touch them!' cried Jack, indignant at the mere suggestion. 'Why, mother, I would as soon suspect myself as Rebekah!—or as Jane either, though she is not like Rebekah.'

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'Perhaps you did take them in your sleep, you know,' said Aleck, with a mischievous twinkle in his eyes. Jack's sleep-walking propensities had made him fair game for many a joke.

'Mother, send him to bed; he's teasing me,' complained Jack, throwing a cushion at his head.

'Be serious, Aleck! Aren't you ashamed of yourself being so frivolous in the hour of tribulation?'

'Never mind him, mother; I told you he was not domestic! He can't help it, poor fellow! it is the natural weakness and depravity showing itself.'

The mother smiled at her right-hand boy, as she was in the habit of calling Aleck, her sensible, trustworthy son. They understood one another perfectly, as could be seen by the glance exchanged.

'But the question is — where are the candlesticks?' resumed Aleck. 'It is an awfully queer thing! If the girls are above suspicion, we must find out who is not. Has any one been staying in the house? I wonder if Jane had any of her friends here while you were away at Easter with Ross. Jack and I were out of the way most of the time.'

'Briggs was here often enough,' said Jack, 'but he's below suspicion, isn't he?'

'He's a drunken, good-for-nothing fellow,' said Mrs. Norman. 'I wonder if Jane were foolish enough to give him the run of the house.'

'Then he would not go rummaging in your store-closet, mother. He would never think of finding any valuable in that far cupboard. It seems to me that whoever took them knew the bearings of the place.'

'It is very worrying,' said Mrs. Norman, much disturbed and put out. 'Don't say anything to Ross about it yet; we may find them after all.'

'I hate suspicions!' said Jack vehemently. 'I hate to look at people and wonder if they are thieves. I shall feel quite guilty the next time I see Jane or Briggs!'

'Hush! here is Jane,' said Mrs. Norman.

She knocked at the door, asking her mistress some question relative to domestic affairs, and Mrs. Norman went out. In a

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few minutes she returned, and catching sight of her face Jack sprang up.

'What have you found out, mother? Something, I can see by your face.'

'I have only found out that Briggs cleaned the windows, and was consequently in my room and the storeroom. It occurred to me that all the windows had been cleaned, and I asked Jane who did them. She told me at once, and added of her own accord that he had cleaned the storeroom skylight.'

'Looks bad for Mr. Briggs,' said Aleck; 'but I think it shows that Jane knows nothing about it. If she knew she would have kept that small item to herself.'

'Well, what's to be done now?' said Jack. 'Shall I go and fetch a policeman?'

'Nonsense, Jack.'

'But, my dear mother, what is to be done? I suppose you want to get the candlesticks back. Shall Aleck and I go and drag him in by the hair of his head, or the what-you-may-call-it of his neck, and force him down on his knees to 'fess? I'll be bound he's in the kitchen.'

'I suppose it is no use asking him,' said Mrs. Norman. 'He would only deny it. His character is not a good one, we know.'

'Of course he would deny it. Catch him owning up!'

'Well,' sighed Mrs. Norman, 'I don't see what we can do now. We have no proof at all against him, so we must let it drop.'

'My dear mother,' said Jack patronisingly, 'that perhaps is a natural view for a woman to take. Let us hear what the lawyer has to say. Mr. Norman, solicitor, will open the case for the prosecution. Now, Aleck, let us have lawyer's opinion.'

'My opinion is that it is bed-time,' yawned Aleck. 'I've had a rattling day's work, and can scarcely keep my eyes open. Let us sleep on it, mother, as we used to say. Nothing can be done in a hurry. We will get back Ross's candlesticks if possible. Come, Jack.'

'Can't!' groaned Jack. 'There's that beastly imposition to be done to-night!—a good hour's work! You go to bed,

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mother, and I will sit up for Ross. He is sure to be in before I am ready for bed. There's no party; only Tom and himself.'

Not many mothers would allow their boys such liberty as Mrs. Norman gave hers. They might go out and come in when they liked, provided she knew where they went. This was an understood, rather than an expressed rule, and one the boys never dreamed of transgressing, except in a few solitary instances—Jack's visits to Hickory and Ross's to the Force, for example.

Jack opened his books and set to work with a will, late though it was for him. He was fond of his bed—too fond, his mother said; and it was easier to work over-night than rise earlier for the purpose.

He had just finished the last line when Ross came in and flung himself in a chair.

'How late you are!' said Jack. 'What have you been doing till this time of night?'

'Doing?—lots of things.'

Jack looked quickly up. 'You are quite hoarse! Is there a fog to-night?'

'No, except in your brain,' returned Ross, with a laugh. 'I'm off to bed; good-night.'

Jack sat perfectly still, gazing at the open door, and listening to the sound of the receding footsteps. Then he turned off the gas and went to his own room with a feeling of forlorn wretchedness which he had never experienced before. Again the absolute proof of a horrible disgrace had been forced upon him. Ross was the worse for drink! not to any great extent; he himself would not have suspected it in the short interview if his suspicions had not been already roused. But under existing circumstances it was clear enough.

It was torture to poor, proud Jack. In the boy's very nature there was a horror of this one thing; a hatred and loathing which had been fostered into active strength the past year by Mr. Harborough.

'I wish all the beastly stuff were poured into the sea!' he muttered, shaking up his pillow fiercely. 'It is going to be the curse of our family, I can see, unless Ross draws rein. What in the world am I to do to stop him?'

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A question which often enough he had occasion to ask himself as the time went on. He found himself almost constantly on the look-out, keeping a furtive watch on Ross, and listening at all sorts of odd times for the sound of his voice.

Sometimes he thought he would tell Aleck, and then they could talk it over together, and perhaps devise some means of appeal to Ross's better feelings; but there had always been a *cordon* of reserve between the two elder brothers, and he knew that Ross would never forgive him for telling Aleck. No; he could not do it! Ross was his favourite brother, and Jack was true and loyal.

The pigeon still continued its daily visits, the brief cessation of which in the early spring had never been accounted for. Sometimes the boys met Mrs. Harborough and Clarice and Cecile in their little pony carriage, and if it were out of the town they would generally stop and speak. Briggs drove the pair of spirited ponies, which were beyond Mrs. Harborough's control. He had been promoted from his post as under gardener and taken into favour by his master; but Mrs. Harborough did not like him. Perhaps her manner showed this, and he resented it; he certainly showed the worst side of his character to her, and was usually surly, and often disrespectful. More than once he had appeared before her the worse for drink, and when she reproved him had been insolent in his covert sneer. Backed by his master, he dared anything.

In some inexplicable way it had come to Jane's ears that her mistress suspected him of some act of dishonesty. Either she had caught a few words through the doors, or Maggie had heard something, and, not knowing all, had repeated it, and so, as was too common with her, had made mischief.

Jane had carried the story to Briggs, in indignation and unbelief, and he resented it, not with a manly, high-principled resentment of the mere suspicion of dishonesty, but with a sullen, spiteful vindictiveness, which was unfortunately only too characteristic. Added to this, Jack had spoken to him about his drinking propensities, and told him he was no fit husband for good, steady Jane. In his wrath Briggs had declared that he would be even with him yet, and with Mrs.

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Norman; indeed, with the whole family. In vain Jane, who sincerely loved her mistress and the boys, tried to convince him that Master Jack meant no harm; and that she herself thought he would be far better without so much beer. He took this as the result of Jack's interference, and though to pacify Jane he pretended to let it drop, he still harboured a feeling of hatred and revenge.

His first opportunity soon presented itself. He told Mr. Harborough that he was sure that these ponies would come to grief one of these days, being pulled up sharp so constantly, just when they were in full swing. He spoke in an injured tone, as if he had the welfare of his charge at heart.

'Who pulls them up?' asked Mr. Harborough.

'Mrs. Harborough makes me pull up, no matter what pace the creatures are going. Of course, if she wants to stand talking half an hour in the road, and the young ladies, it's no business of mine; only there's the ponies,' replied Briggs, watching his master's face.

'To whom does she stop talking half an hour in the streets?'

'Sometimes one, sometimes another. Mostly one of the Normans,' said Briggs, calculating the effect of his words, and chuckling inwardly.

Mr. Harborough went in and sought his wife.

'So you have not thought fit to remember my express wish respecting those neighbours of yours?' he said, with a sneer.

'I have remembered it, Robert,' was the quiet reply. 'I have not been in their house since, neither have they been here.'

'Neither have you made appointments to meet them out, I suppose?'

'Neither have I made appointments to meet them anywhere.'

'They have all been chance meetings, of course. You had no idea they were out on a certain road when you inadvertently chose that direction for your drive. Oh dear no! Sheer accident, as these things generally are. Will it be necessary for me to tell Briggs that I object to having the ponies pulled up so frequently? you really should consider the comfort of the poor dumb beasts a little more, my dear.'

'There is no occasion for you to insult me by placing a

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servant as spy on my movements, Robert. I have wished for some time to speak to you about Briggs,' said Mrs. Harborough, speaking with painful effort. 'He is not at all a suitable servant; he is disrespectful, and sometimes insolent. I should be glad if you would dismiss him.'

'Excuse me, the men-servants are my business. He suits me, and that, I believe, is the thing to be considered. Dismiss all your women-servants, if you please, but leave the men alone.'

Mrs. Harborough said no more. Had it not been for Cecile's sake she would have refrained from using the carriage at all, but fresh air was necessary for the child's failing health. The next time they met the boys, they drove past with bows and heightened colour. Jack stood still, and stared after the retreating carriage.

'Who has been doing that?' he exclaimed. 'There has been some fresh row, I'll be bound. Somebody has been telling that brute that they stop to speak to us, and he has vetoed it of course. I would like to know how it came about.'

'Briggs, probably,' said Ross, who was intensely annoyed. 'Dot will tell us.'

But Dot failed again that day to pay his accustomed visit. Associating this with the episode of the morning, they were convinced that something fresh had occurred, and were impatient and anxious to know what it was. It was just as well they did not know all.

For some time Clarice had been on her guard while Briggs was about, watching a safe minute to let Dot out for his daily fly. Although she knew nothing for certain against the man's fidelity, she distrusted him, and feared to let him into their secret. He was sharp and observant, and she dreaded his keen, inquisitive eye.

Not wishing to give them any unnecessary trouble, Mrs. Harborough had told them nothing of their father's expressed wish respecting speaking to the Normans till they were about to start for the drive. Clarice's indignation was great, and her dislike to Briggs proportionately increased. On returning home she at once wrote a note explaining their apparently strange conduct, and fastened it under Dot's wing. Cecile added a few little weak lines.

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They were about to let the pigeon fly, when they caught sight of Briggs; he was standing among the trees at some distance, apparently absorbed in counting the pears on a little graft.

'There he is!' said Clarice, drawing back. 'He is pretending to be gazing at the trees. I wish I were a man!'

'Why?' asked Cecile, amused at her sister's energy.

'Because I should like to go straight out and turn that fellow off the premises. Mean, contemptible spy! He would be only too glad to tell papa about poor little Dot. Would he not, Dot? We know him, don't we, my pet?'

'What would papa do?' said Cecile, in alarm. 'He would order us to keep Dot at home. Oh, Clarice! has Briggs seen him fly over, do you think?'

'No; if he had, papa would have known before this,' was the decisive reply. 'But we must be more careful than we have been. I believe Briggs suspects.'

Clarice was right. Briggs had his suspicions about the pretty little messenger, and consequently was keeping his eyes open, and was always on the watch. Clarice and Cecile little thought how often he loitered about under the shelter of the trees, watching their window.

He was rewarded at last by seeing Dot fly off in the direction of Northland. Presently it returned, and was eagerly taken in by Cecile herself, whose greatest pleasure it was to sit at the window, watching its flight and return.

'So much for that,' said Briggs, emerging from his hiding-place, and stealing round to the stables. 'Some of your little game, Master Jack Norman, I'll be bound. I'll soon put a spoke in your wheel.'

He was half-intoxicated at the time, but was sober enough to keep his own counsel, though he felt strongly tempted to go straight to his master with the information. After waiting several days, and making sure that the pigeon really went to Northland, he contrived to summon his master to the stables on some pretext about the horses just at the time when Dot usually sped on his errand. Mr. Harborough was fond of his horses, and it was no uncommon thing for him to lounge through the stables at different parts of the day. Having seen the supposed invalid, he went on

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through the side gate into the garden, Briggs following, and calling his attention to various young trees. Before they stepped in sight of Cecile's window he stopped, and, shading his eyes with his hand, looked up.

'Pretty little thing that carrier of Miss Cecile's,' he said, with assumed indifference. 'Seems to know what it has under its wing, doesn't it, sir?'

Mr. Harborough looked suspiciously at him. 'What has it under its wing?' he asked, following the pigeon's rapid flight with his eyes, and seeing Clarice take it in.

Briggs shrugged his shoulders. 'Well, of course, sir, I haven't seen anything; but carriers are mostly kept to carry.'

'You mind your own business,' said his master savagely, struck by the sly half-smile playing on his face. 'I'll teach you to spy and interfere, sirrah! Be off to your stables this moment.'

With an evil look Briggs slunk off, this reception of his gratuitous news being more than he had bargained for.

Mr. Harborough went in, but business called him away from home, and he did not return till the next day. Cecile was lying on her couch reading, when the unusual sound of her father's approaching footsteps brought the ready flush to her pale face, and made her start forward in nervous alarm.

'Whatever is papa coming here for?' said Clarice under her breath. 'Don't be frightened, Cecile; he won't hurt you, dear.'

She had no time for more. The door opened, and Mr. Harborough came in and threw himself down in an easy chair.

'Where is your mother?' he asked, after a short silence.

'She has gone out, papa.'

His voice told his state and mood, and the sisters trembled. For some time he took no further notice of them, and they sat in silence, watching the window with beating hearts and anxious eyes. It was time for Dot's return, and what would their father say and do if by any chance he discovered the note under its wing? That he already knew of its existence they had not the slightest idea.

Clarice stole to the window to be in readiness to seize it the moment it appeared. Mr. Harborough reached forward and rang the bell, and ordered brandy and water immediately.

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It was brought, and with a smile he told Clarice to mix him a glassful.

With a shudder the poor child obeyed, and then went back to her post. In a few minutes Dot fluttered its wings against the pane, and she drew it in furtively. Glancing round to see if she were observed, she saw her father's eyes fixed upon her with the mocking look she so hated.

'What have you there?'

'Only a pigeon, papa.'

'Only a pigeon! What sort of a pigeon?'

'I think it is what they call a carrier,' she replied, not daring to evade the truth.

'And pray who are "they"?'

'Everybody, papa; those who know about pigeons.'

'Where did you get it from?'

'It is not mine, papa; it is Cecile's. It was given her long ago.'

'Who gave it her?'

'Ross Norman,' was the low, reluctant reply.

'Where has it been this morning?'

'We send it out every day, papa.'

'I daresay you do; I have no doubt of it,' sneered Mr. Harborough, who had lost all sense of fatherly affection and dignity, as indeed he had lost all sense of everything noble and manly and of all qualities appertaining to a Christian gentleman. 'Where do you send it?'

Clarice turned crimson, but made no reply.

'Bring it to me.'

She looked up imploringly at him. 'You will not hurt it, papa?'

'Bring it to me!'

The little thing looked frightened, and struggled as she placed it in his hand. He grasped it roughly and shook it.

'Be still, you little brute, or I will make you! Come now, Clarice, since you know all about pigeons, show me where "they" put the notes and *billet-doux* and such things. Round its neck?'

'I know very little about pigeons, papa,' she faltered, a dim suspicion entering her mind that he knew about the note, and was purposely playing with her.

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'Where does Ross Norman put his?' he went on, looking her in the face with his cruel eyes, and smiling at her evident distress.

There was no help for it; discovery was inevitable. Lifting the tender wing with no gentle hand, he took out the folded note and opened it, still holding the pigeon.

'My eyesight is failing,' he said mockingly. 'Here, Clarice, read it aloud for me.'

She took the note in her trembling hands and looked at him, gathering the courage of desperation.

'The note is for Cecile, papa—not for you. You will not surely be so dishonourable as to read her letters?'

He stretched out his hand to take it from her, but she started back, and, quick as thought, tore the paper into fragments.

For one long minute father and daughter stood looking at each other in silence: he, white with concentrated, blind, intoxicated rage; she, mute and still, with a certain childish dignity of repressed and hidden fear. Then, with a coarse oath, he seized Dot by the head, swung it rapidly round, and flung it out of the window.

Cecile sprang forward with a cry of agony and horror. 'Papa, papa, you have killed it!'

He took no notice, but strode out of the room, kicking chair and table out of his way as he went.

Waiting till the sound of his footsteps had died away, Clarice went down-stairs, and picked up Dot's quivering body. Its neck was wrung, but it was not quite dead. She stole away out of sight of Cecile's window, thinking only how she could put her poor little messenger out of its pain.

As she stood under the limes, looking down with fast-flowing tears, she heard Jack's well-known whistle close by. He was in his own garden, but so near that she would have no difficulty in attracting his attention. While she was hesitating, he appeared on the top of the wall, and looked down in astonishment, not expecting to see any one in that remote part of the garden.

'Clarice! How jolly!' he exclaimed, but stopped short on seeing her tear-stained face.

'What is the matter?' he asked, in consternation. 'What is that?—not Dot?'

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He sprang down and took it from her, touching the soft feathers lovingly.

'Poor Dot!—poor little fellow! Why, its neck is wrung, Clarice!'

'Put it out of its misery, Jack, please,' she said, struggling with the choking sobs. 'I cannot bear to see it quiver so.'

'It is dead now, quite dead. It will quiver no more, Clarice,' he said gently. 'Shall I bury it for you? Come and sit down in the old arbour; no one will come this way.'

He drew her to their old favourite retreat, and then she gave way to the storm that was within her—not so much grief as passionate indignation and shame.

It did her good, even though Jack could only offer his boyish sympathy. He did that freely, as wrathful and indignant as herself.

'Oh, Jack,' she said earnestly, 'if papa would only give up that dreadful drink! It is that which has changed his whole nature. When Cecile and I were little children he used to be so kind to us; how can he be so cruel now? He has lost all love for us.'

'Perhaps he will change again,' said Jack, trying to find something comforting to say. 'People do have fits of wickedness, you know.'

Clarice shook her head. 'Papa is not naturally unkind; it is all that one thing, Jack,' and she lowered her voice. 'Do you think he cannot help drinking? Do you think it possible that it is like a real disease, and cannot be helped? I sometimes think so; it does seem as if he had no control over himself—as if he *must* drink, no matter whether he wants to or not. It frightens me.'

'Dr. Burton says there is a fascination in drink which few can resist if they once give way to it,' said Jack soberly, his thoughts going to one nearer and dearer than Mr Harborough. 'He says it is too often a fatally dangerous thing to trifle with, for habit is formed unconsciously.'

'Papa formed his habit, then, when he was a boy,' said Clarice sorrowfully. 'Aunt Alice told mamma that he was taught to like beer and wine as soon as he was old enough to leave the nursery. Grandpapa used to laugh at him and call

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him a manly little fellow when he drank off a glass of wine. He did not know what he was doing! He did not know what he was preparing for us! Oh, grandpapa, if you had but known!'

Dropping her head on the rustic table, she wept a few bitter tears, and then rose to go.

'Don't say anything about it, Jack, please,' she said, holding out her hand. 'I don't mind you knowing — and Ross, because you gave us the pigeon; but I cannot bear to have it talked about. I must go now; if Briggs sees me he will go straight and tell papa. Good-bye, Jack.'

'Mean beggar!' cried Jack hotly. 'I would like nothing better than to give him a good horsewhipping! Fancy being spied on by a servant! It is too bad, Clarice.'

'So are a great many things,' she replied, trying to smile, but failing. 'Briggs is like his master in one respect: he has lost the better part of himself.'

She went back to the house, and found Cecile exhausted by grief and tears. Mr. Harborough did not come near their room again, neither did he demand his wife's presence in the dining-room that evening. His manner at the dinner-table was a curious mixture of sullen shame and defiance; at least, so Mrs. Harborough interpreted it, and she knew him. The fact was, he was ashamed of his act of wilful cruelty. At times it seemed as if his old better nature reasserted itself for a few short hours, but he always drank it down.

A piece of good fortune had befallen the Norman boys that morning. An irascible old cousin, who hitherto had ignored their existence, had taken it into his head to write to their mother about them, and had enclosed a ten-pound note to be divided between the three. To Ross especially it was a god-send, and, laying claim to his share at once, he took it to school with him. Added to his present hoard, it would enable him to redeem all his pawned treasures, except the candle-sticks.

He could not manage to catch Frank alone, but as it was half-holiday he did not much care.

In the afternoon he sauntered down to the shop and went in.

Mrs. Harley herself was in the shop—a delicate, careworn

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woman, with a superior face and manner. Her eldest girl, Rose, was with her, and two little boys were playing behind the counter.

'Can I see Frank? Is he at home, Mrs. Harley?' asked Ross, raising his cap.

She hesitated painfully.

'He is at home, Master Norman,' she said at last, her face flushing crimson; 'but he is engaged just now.'

One of the children in his play pushed open the door leading into a back parlour, and Frank's voice was heard distinctly.

'But, father, it means absolute ruin!'

The door banged to, and Ross heard no more.

'Will you ask him to run up to Northland this evening, Mrs. Harley? I shall be much obliged. I want to see him.'

'Certainly I will,' she replied, evidently relieved by the prospect of his speedy departure.

'I wonder if ruin is coming there?' mused Ross, as he left the shop. 'She does not look fit to rough it, poor thing! Frank has looked awfully down lately.'

He looked much more so when he made his appearance at Northland that evening. Since Ross's illness he had dropped his shrubbery visits, and knocked at the front door in more civilised and orthodox fashion.

Jack met him in the hall, and looked very suspiciously at him. There was, however, no parcel or package which could, by any stretch of the imagination, be magnified into a concealed bottle.

'Ross is in the study. You know your way,' he said. 'Here, come along.'

He threw open the study-door and then flew off, for he had a scheme in his inventive brain, and was too busy to trouble much about Ross's concerns just then.

'I called at your place, but you were engaged,' said Ross, pushing back his books. 'You do not look over-cheerful.'

'I haven't need,' said Frank listlessly. 'How goes the Rutland?'

'Oh, I'm at work as usual. Is there any fresh trouble, Frank?

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Ross lowered his voice with instinctive delicacy, and spoke and looked as he felt—sympathetic. His friendship for Frank was real.

'It is no use talking about it,' replied Frank bitterly. 'Only the old thing.'

They were silent for a time, then Ross pushed a little heap of money across the table.

'At last! I have waited long enough. Will you see about those things at once, Frank?'

'The ring, or the candlesticks?'

'Oh, not the candlesticks. Let them wait. Get all the rest. You cannot think what a relief it will be to have them once more in my own possession. I have grown tired of waiting.'

'I will get them,' said Frank, pocketing the money carefully. 'I wish you were clear of that concern altogether.'

'So do I,' assented Ross. 'I will pay your bill now, Frank. Bring me up another of that pale brandy in a day or two, won't you, old fellow?'

Frank looked at him irresolutely.

'I wonder if you will mind my saying something?' he said, speaking with unusual hesitation, and slightly colouring.

'Fire away,' replied Ross, looking up in some surprise. 'I won't be offended.'

'It is about that—the brandy. I am so afraid it will do you harm.'

'In what way?'

'Well, physically, of course. But I am not thinking of immediate consequences.'

'I don't know what you mean,' said Ross haughtily.

'I know you will resent what I am going to say, but I can't help it, Norman. Father has made it so real to me.'

Frank dropped his head upon his hands, and looked so unutterably miserable that Ross's anger died away.

'Of course it is an awful trouble for your father to go on in the way he does. I am more sorry than I can tell you, Frank. But I do not see what it has to do with me.'

'Only that my father told me this afternoon that if he had never touched beer or spirits when he was a boy he would never have fallen as he has done,' replied Frank, lifting up his

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honest, earnest face. 'We have had such a scene, Norman. I shall never forget it!'

'Like that time?' said Ross, referring to Frank's bruised temple.

'Oh no! he was not angry. I took him in a good mood, and begged him, for my mother's sake, and the children's, to give it all up. He says he can't do it, Norman; he has not the moral strength. I don't mind speaking of it now, to you. It is town talk. Everybody knows that he is going down hill as fast as he can—he and Mr. Harborough. But what is the use of talking? All I want to say is this: When father was talking this afternoon, saying that drink had been his curse from his boyhood, I could not help wondering if the time would ever come when you would regret learning to take it as you do. Don't be vexed, Norman. I could not help the thought—and the fear,' he added steadily.

'Fear!' echoed Ross.

'Yes, it *is* a fear on *me!* Norman, if the time ever comes when I shall see you like my father or Mr. Harborough, I shall never forgive myself!' cried poor Frank passionately. '*That* is my fear—that *I* am helping you to lay a foundation for shame and dishonour.'

Ross's hand trembled as he dipped his pen in the ink.

'You must have a nice opinion of me,' he said, trying to speak with composure and indifference.

'Don't speak like that, Norman! It's not a question of my opinion of any one, but of the power of a certain thing.'

'It has no power over me.'

'But it may have.'

'Not very likely, seeing that I take it entirely as a medicine,' said Ross drily.

'Well,' said Frank, after a long pause, 'you must look after yourself, of course. I know it is really no business of mine, but I could not help speaking.'

'Don't do it again,' said Ross.

Frank took up his cap.

'I won't stay now. I have promised mother to be home soon. Don't look upon me as an interfering meddler, Norman.'

'No, you are not that; but it is rather a cool thing to tell me I am following Mr. Harborough's footsteps.'

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'I do not say that!—you know it. Well, good evening. I will see about the ring and chain.'

He went off, and Jack came in and took his seat on the table, swinging his feet.

'Where have you been all day?' he asked. 'I haven't caught a glimpse of you since dinner. What did Frank want?'

'I wanted to see him about some things he has of mine. I called there, but he was busy.'

'They say there will be a smash there before long. Harley pater is going ahead like steam. I saw Clarice to-day.'

'Where?'

'In her garden,' replied Jack. And then he told the whole story, embellishing it as mood suggested. Clarice's recital had necessarily left much to the imagination, for she had not entered into detail.

'I have buried Dot under the lilacs,' he concluded. 'You had better compose an epitaph, something touching and to the point. Another victim to drink, and so on.'

Ross changed colour. Why should that hated subject crop up continually.

'Clarice says her father got his taste for drink when he was a mere child, and it has grown upon him. It is curious how that sort of thing does grow,' continued Jack, not without ulterior motives. 'There seems such a fascination in it.'

'For some,' said Ross, without raising his head. 'I suppose our correspondence with Cecile comes to an end now.'

'Well, I have been turning it over in my mind, and trying to devise some other means of carrying it on, but can't manage it. Bother! I wish the Lunacy Commissioners would clap old Harborough in an asylum. My belief is that he is a lunatic. I believe drink does take away a man's senses in the long run. It is the most charitable view to take of his conduct, anyhow.'

After a few more explosive sentences, Jack took his seat and opened his books. In a short time he was absorbed in study, but not so Ross. He struggled in vain to concentrate his wandering thoughts; they would not be controlled. Frank's words, and now Jack's, haunted him. Was there any possibility of his future resembling Mr. Harborough's?

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A bare possibility—not probability; the latter his haughty pride banished at once.

Already the habit had gained a strong hold on him, and he knew it. Night after night he increased the quantity of the pleasant stimulant, and drank it with an appreciation of its flavour and effect which was new to him. In fact, he was beginning to drink for the sake of drinking—for the sake of the immediate pleasure.

He knew that it was more to him than it had ever been, but accounted for it by saying that his strength depended upon it, and that he could not work without some such aid.

Still he felt restless and ill at ease that night. Could there be any danger for him? Frank's words had touched him more than he cared to own—had touched both his pride and his better nature. It had wounded him deeply to find that such an idea in association with him had obtained for one moment in Frank's mind. He had thought himself on far too high a level to be distrusted, and bitterly resented the supposed insult.

At the same time his generous nature could forgive much under the circumstances. Mr. Harborough's wretched condition, and the misery he was bringing on his family, was excuse for much of Frank's fear. Naturally the scalded hand shrinks from the slightest jet of steam.

'I must draw in,' he thought; 'I must take less or get it elsewhere. Do without it I cannot—at least, not till after the Rutland. I will think about it then.'

Quieting all further reflections by this resolve, he dropped the subject with an easier mind. For the next few weeks he struggled hard to keep the craving for drink within check. Night after night he resisted fierce temptation, and oft-times paced the floor in an agony of inward wrestling. Never had he passed through such storm and tempest, and it told fearfully upon his physical strength. He hoped for a cessation of the strain during the holidays, when, as before, they went to the sea; but he was disappointed, and found his task harder than he had thought possible.

In vain he called to his aid his pride and self-respect; his utmost endeavours to keep within bounds failed, and time after time he drank till he slept the deep sleep of intoxication.

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The very taste of the attractive drink robbed him of resolution. In the daytime, away from all temptation, he felt strong to resist, but in the solitude of his own room at night he failed and fell.

And yet he saw his danger. He could not blind himself to the truth, and was forced to own to his own condemning conscience that he was running a great and fearful risk.

His life at that time was one continual warfare—victory by day, defeat and failure by night. He hated himself, and sank in his own estimation till he had lost all self-respect.

At times a warning voice told him to give up the destroying thing altogether. 'It is your only chance,' it urged. 'What is the use of trying to keep a giant in check? Destroy it, and it cannot harm you.'

He recognised the truth, the wisdom of the words, but shrank from obeying their counsel.

'I cannot!' he urged in self-defence. 'I shall lose the Rutland! Let me win that, and I will think about it.'

He did not take into consideration that each day bound him faster in the chains, and made his task more difficult. He did not think that each failure paved the way for the next —that each fall made his feet stagger, and unnerved him for the fight—for fight it was, and a desperate one too. A fight between the spirits of darkness and light,—the one dragging him down to ruin, and shame, and death, the other uplifting him, and pointing to happiness and heaven.

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CHAPTER VII.

'IT IS DRINK.'

THE holidays passed, and the boys met with a fresh interest and zest. This was expected to be an exciting half, and the school was full of anticipation. The chances for the Rutland were supposed to be pretty equally divided between Ross, Crawford, and Forbes, and the three parties backed their favourites vigorously.

At Northland things went on pretty much as usual, except that Jack was becoming increasingly restless and anxious. The change in Ross was daily becoming more visible to him, and he dreaded the time when others, too, should notice and remark. Already he had more than once been asked if Ross were killing himself for the Rutland, and had passed it off with a joke.

Frank had not returned to school, but, to the surprise of the uninitiated, had made his appearance behind his father's counter. There had been a great stir and talk over it, and many of the boys had cut him dead in consequence of the supposed degradation. But in this respect he had gained more than he had lost. The story of his self-sacrifice had leaked out, and reached the Doctor's ears. Perhaps Ross was responsible for this; he thought it only right that the Doctor's mind should be disabused of any erroneous idea concerning Frank's motives for what certainly seemed an extraordinary action, but could not prevail upon Frank to think so too.

One day, shortly after the recommencement of school, Dr. Winslow walked into the shop, and shook hands cordially

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with his *ci-devant* pupil, who coloured deeply with a boy's natural shame at being seen for the first time with the obnoxious apron.

'I want to have a little talk with you, Frank,' said the Doctor kindly, fully comprehending and sympathizing with his feelings. 'Will you come and dine with me this evening?'

Dine with the Doctor! Frank stared in utter bewilderment, and for the moment forgot his customary good manners. Recovering himself, he stammered out a few words of thanks, not quite knowing what he was saying. He had never before been so honoured, and could not understand why he should be now.

It was rather a formidable thing to sit at that long dining-room table with the somewhat awful head-master and his stately, dignified sister, and the pretty, lady-like little girls. No wonder Frank felt bashful, though the presence of Arthur and little Ted made it more bearable. But he lost all uncomfortable feelings in a short time, and followed the Doctor into his sanctum after dinner without misgivings.

Dr. Winslow spoke most kindly to him of the important step he had taken, and without referring to Mr. Harley made it apparent to Frank that he understood why he had sacrificed his prospects and entered a life so distasteful to him. He spoke a few words of such kindly, appreciative approval, that the boy felt a sudden rush of unbidden tears, and turned his head aside to hide them. From that time he looked upon the Doctor as a friend to be reverenced and loved; and such he proved to be.

Nothing more had been heard about the candlesticks. Having absolutely no proof against Briggs, it had been ruled impossible to take any proceedings in the matter. Aleck and Jack forgot the whole story in a very short time; but their mother was worried over it for Ross's sake.

As for Ross, he was absorbed. Life held but one aim and interest—the Rutland. And this, not from the intrinsic value of the exhibition, but for all it signified.

'My whole future depends upon it,' was his constant feverish thought. 'If I lose, I lose all.'

He had no idea how he was using up brain and vitality in

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his struggle against natural weakness, and the inertness it involved. 'Do or die' was practically his motto, though, perhaps, he had never gone so far in consciousness as to make it theoretically so also.

The consequence of the fatal habit, which had now so strong a hold upon him, was a slow but steady deterioration in his moral and spiritual nature. He was no longer the frank, honourable, high-spirited boy he had been. The charm of his boyish chivalry and high-mindedness was fast disappearing, and he was becoming moody and irritable.

Aleck was one of the first to notice the change, which had been so gradual as to be imperceptible till some sudden shock sent the memory back to the time that had passed. Remembering when Ross had been different, Aleck stood aghast at what he saw now. He watched and wondered some time with his opened eyes, and noticed much that had hitherto escaped him.

'How is Ross getting on at school?' he asked Jack one day. A curious question, and Jack started.

'I mean, he is all right, isn't he?'

'I don't know what you mean,' said Jack candidly. 'It is all Dutch to me! What should go wrong with him at school?'

'I don't know—I don't understand. He is so changed—so altered lately. It struck me that something was wrong somewhere.'

Ah, somewhere! but not at school. Jack made no reply; he understood now what he meant well enough.

One or two of the boys held fast to Frank through the misfortune which had befallen him, and perhaps his warmest friend was Tom Longman, whose generous, kindly nature had really felt for his disappointment. Aubrey, too, felt more sociably disposed toward him, and often ran into the shop for a chat. Not unfrequently Tom asked him to his home for the evening; and though Mrs. Longman objected to the town boys as a rule, she had no dislike to him; no one had.

Ross went to Longman's more frequently than he had been accustomed to do, meeting there the few for whose society he really cared. Jack scarcely ever went. With real pain he saw that Ross was ill at ease in his company, and rather than

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be any restraint upon him he declined all invitations which included both.

He had gone to bed one evening, leaving Aleck sitting up for Ross, who was out. It was Aleck's custom to sit up for both, or either of the boys, if they were out late, for Mrs. Norman was not strong, and had been forbidden late hours. The clock had struck eleven, when Jack heard a pebble rattle against his window. It was such an unusual occurrence of late, that after the first start he concluded it was a mistake, and settled down in bed again. Just as he was covering up his ears, in Jack-fashion, a second rattle startled him out of bed, and drawing aside the blind he saw a familiar-looking figure gesticulating to him from the gravel.

It was so evidently signing caution, that, with a feeling of apprehension and alarm, he opened the window and leaned out.

'Who is it?' he asked.

'Hush! Can you come out without being heard?' whispered a voice, which he recognised as Tom's. 'You must come!' he added urgently.

'I am in bed—I mean, I was,' said Jack, not relishing the idea at all. 'What is it all about? Won't to-morrow do?'

'No. Don't be a fool, Jack! Come at once. It is about Ross,' whispered Tom energetically. 'Don't let any one hear you, for mercy's sake!'

With a sinking heart Jack hurried on his things, and stealthily made his way down to the little side door. He found Tom waiting for him, and without a word they hurried out of the moonlight into the shrubbery shade.

Under a tree stood Frank Harley, and at his feet sat Ross Norman, apparently fast asleep. He was leaning partly against the tree, partly against Frank's knee.

With a smothered exclamation Jack sprang forward.

'Hush!' said Frank, seizing his arm. 'He is not hurt. It is—drink.'

Jack gave one gasp, and stood perfectly still. An awful horror fell upon him like a hideous nightmare, clouding and crowding out all light and life. It had come at last, the disgrace and shame.

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He looked up in Frank's face, and saw what he took to be pity. It roused him to fury.

'This is your work,' he whispered hoarsely, pointing down with a trembling finger. 'You are responsible for this—you'—

He could say no more. The words came up and choked him. Frank turned white.

'Not this,' he said, with a look of horror. 'I am to blame. I have done my share, but not this. I have tried to prevent it. God knows I have. We both tried.'

'Yes,' said Tom quietly, 'Frank is right, Jack. We did our utmost, but Ross was beside himself. It is no use pitching into us; the question is, what are we to do with him? I thought it best to call you because of your mother.'

'Aleck is sitting up. We must tell him,' said poor Jack, with a groan. 'We cannot manage to get him up-stairs without Aleck's knowing. I will go and tell him.'

'Couldn't we three get him in the side door and up to his room without telling any one?'

'It is impossible; they would hear. No, I must tell Aleck,' repeated Jack, like one in a dream. 'Wait here.'

He went in, but how, or in what words he told Aleck, he never could remember. Without a word Aleck followed him out, and they stood looking down upon unconscious Ross.

'Can you carry him?' whispered Tom. 'I will help you. I am the strongest.'

They took him between them and carried him in, laying him on the dining-room couch.

'I will go up and light the gas,' said Jack, still speaking in a whisper. 'You will need light.'

He stole up, but not so lightly that his mother from her room at the top of the stairs did not hear.

'Ross!'

He stood undecided; then opened her door.

'It is not Ross; it is I, Jack.'

'I thought you were in bed long ago, dear. I thought it was Ross. Hasn't he come in yet?'

'He will not be long now,' was the evasive reply. 'Don't lie awake to think of him, mother! I shall be jealous.'

Mrs. Norman laughed at the idea. There was no jealousy among her children.

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He shut the door and went on to Ross's room, where he lit the gas. Taking off his slippers, he crept back noiselessly; this time unheard.

'Mamma is awake,' he whispered. 'We must wait. She heard me.'

Tom looked uneasy, and glanced at the clock.

'It is getting so awfully late. Can't you say you are carrying up a bag of apples or something? It is nearly twelve o'clock, Aleck.'

'You go; Jack and I can manage.'

'No; I shall not go till I have seen Ross safe. Jack cannot carry him so well as I. If we take off our boots perhaps we can do it quietly enough. Let us try.'

Both Aleck and Tom were strong, well-grown boys, and Ross, though awkward to carry, and a dead weight, was not heavy. They crept up the stairs, stopping every minute to listen, but no sound disturbed the stillness of the night.

Little did Mrs. Norman think that her favourite boy, her cherished Ross, was being carried past her door at that midnight hour in the heavy insensibility of an intoxicated sleep.

Left with Frank, Jack turned to him with a face so full of misery as to be scarcely recognisable.

'Who else knows of this?'

'No one. Longman and I are the only ones.'

'As yet!'

Frank flushed crimson. 'Do you think that either he or I will ever say one word about it? I have been to blame, I know. I cannot forgive myself, but you judge me hardly, Jack.'

There was such evident suffering in his voice that Jack was softened.

'He got the cursed drink through you,' he said bitterly; 'you supplied him.'

'I know it; but I did not know how far it was gaining the mastery over him. I spoke about it to him—I told him I feared the end; but he was only angry with me for speaking. It was not for me to dictate to him, you know that.'

'No; it is no one's fault, really,' replied Jack. 'No one could help it! You will keep it to yourself, Frank—you will promise that?'

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'If you think any promise necessary. It shall never cross my lips to a living soul.'

Tom came stealing down and heard the words.

'You don't think we are such mean beggars, do you, Jack Norman?' he said angrily. 'Ross was my guest, and I am not likely to tell tales of my own guests. It is as safe with us as with you. I will answer for Frank.'

They shook hands silently, and left. Jack locked up, and went to Ross's room.

He found Aleck sitting by the bed, his face on his hands, Ross still asleep.

'Go to bed, Aleck. I will stay here,' he whispered.

'Why should *I* go to bed?'

'You had better. Ross will never forgive you if he finds you here. It is not quite new to me, Aleck; I have seen it all along.'

'Then why did you not speak?' said Aleck, glad, in his misery, to have some one to blame. 'Why did you not tell some one, and stop it.'

'Whom should I tell?'

'Me! I am the eldest; I ought to have known.'

'What could you have done? I did what I could. Besides, there was nothing really to tell. It was mostly suspicion.'

'A Norman carried home *drunk!*' groaned Aleck. 'I can't believe it! I cannot realize it! What will mother say?'

'She must never know!' interrupted Jack sharply. 'Why should she? We must keep our own counsel. *They* have promised.'

'Yes, but they know! Harley, too, of all fellows!'

'He is a very good fellow. I would rather trust him than Longman,' replied Jack, sitting down and gazing moodily round the room. 'It is no use both sitting up. You go. I shall stay here and have it out with Ross when he awakes. I shall not leave him to-night.'

'Then lie down, at any rate,' said Aleck. 'There is the couch; wrap yourself up and go to sleep.'

He waited till Jack was settled, then turned the gas low, and went to his own room. It was a memorable night for the two brothers. Ross slept heavily, and every now and then

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Jack stole to the bedside and looked at him. More than once Aleck crept into the room to see if all were right. There was little sleep for either of them.

Toward six Jack dozed off, and waking with a start an hour later found Ross looking round with bewildered eyes.

'What are you doing here?' he demanded sharply, on seeing his brother. 'Is anything the matter?'

'Not—no'— began Jack confusedly; then stopped and coloured with intense shame as the events of the night crowded on his memory.

For some moments they looked at each other in silence, Ross's face gradually growing white as the pillow on which he leaned.

'I was at Longman's,' he said at last. 'I can't remember! What did I do, Jack?'

There was something pitiful in the eager, questioning look, the trying to see how much Jack knew.

'They brought you home, Tom and Frank. They were obliged to! You could not walk!' stammered Jack, wishing now that he had let Aleck stay; it was a harder task than he had anticipated.

'I remember not feeling well! I remember they had to give me wine, or something,' said Ross, still in the same restless, eager tone. 'So they brought me home, did they? Who?'

'Why, Tom and Frank. No one else knows anything about it—at least, only Aleck and I.'

'Aleck!'

'Yes; he waited up for you. We were obliged to tell him, Ross.'

'I was ill!' repeated Ross. 'I suppose I took a little too much. I cannot stand much, you know—much wine, I mean. It must have got into my head, but I cannot remember.'

He was trying his utmost to appear indifferent; to pass it off as an accident occasioned by illness; but he could not do it. His hands trembled visibly as he pushed back the heavy hair from his hot forehead, and he watched Jack's face almost fiercely.

'Didn't they tell you I was ill? What did they say?' he continued.

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'No; they said nothing about illness,' said Jack steadily, but turning away his eyes. 'They said you had drunk too much—that was all.'

'All! And they did not say why? I call that telling half a tale.'

What could Jack say? He knew that they had told the whole tale, plain and unvarnished. He knew the plea of illness was but a blind; but he could not say so. He could not tell Ross to his face that he knew he was deceiving him.

'I suppose mamma knows nothing about it,' said Ross, after a pause.

'No, she was in bed.'

'Then you had better not mention it to her; it will only trouble her. She will think I am going in for fever again.'

'No,' said Jack sorrowfully; 'it would break her heart. She could not bear it.'

'Bear what?' said Ross angrily.

'The disgrace. It is the first time a Norman has been brought home—drunk!' replied Jack, in a low tone, not having courage to look up.

'I was *not* drunk. How dare you insult me?' cried Ross furiously. 'I will not take it, even from you. How dare you say such a thing?'

'It was what the world calls drunk.'

'I don't care for the world. The world knows nothing about it; it is you, and Aleck, I suppose. No doubt he joins you in your brotherly and charitable opinion.'

'But the world will know, Ross; how can you help it? Tom and Frank know already, and they are part of the world, I suppose.'

Too true! Ross gazed at him, all the anger dying out of his eyes, giving place to unutterable misery and shame.

'Yes, yes; the world will know,' he murmured, dropping his head upon his hands.

There was silence for some minutes—a silence so painful that Jack could not bear it. Springing off the couch, he went to Ross, laying his hand on his shoulder eagerly.

'Don't take it to heart so, old fellow! The world knows nothing as yet, and it never shall, if we can help it. Tom and

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Frank will not breathe a word about it; and oh, Ross, it will never happen again—will it?'

He spoke with passionate entreaty, forgetting everything but the one wild wish to screen Ross from exposure to the sneers and scorn of the world.

'No, never!' said Ross, with a shudder. 'I don't know how it happened. I must have been mad—I was mad! Oh, Jack!'

There were tears trickling through the slender fingers. Jack stood perfectly aghast. Never in all his life had he seen his reserved, self-possessed brother in tears, and it touched him to the quick.

'Don't, old fellow, don't! it isn't so bad as that,' he said, with trembling lips, throwing his arm caressingly around Ross's neck. 'Ever so many people take too much and get served out as you were, and it just teaches them a lesson. It does grow on one so, doesn't it? You will give it up altogether, won't you? Do say yes, Ross.'

There was no reply; through all the agony he was suffering Ross retained a vivid sense of the necessity for caution in all he said and promised. The Rutland was still first and foremost in his mind, and he was determined to do nothing to endanger his chance of winning it.

'I was a fool,' he said at last, raising his head. 'I felt so awfully ill, and it made me reckless. I suppose I said nothing about it to the others. I must tell them. It shall never occur again—never! I promise you that, Jack.'

And with that Jack was forced to be content, or, at any rate, appear so. Really satisfied he could not be.

'Go and speak to Aleck; tell him all about it. I won't have him preaching at me!' continued Ross, beginning to feel irritable. 'Don't let him come here.'

No; Jack felt that it would be well for Aleck to say nothing at the present time. So he went out and stopped him on the threshold, and took him back to his own room.

Aleck listened in silence as he repeated what Ross had said, his face only showing his pain.

'What is to be done?' he asked at length. 'I don't want to interfere, of course, and Ross won't take it from me; but are we to say nothing and let it go on?'

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'I don't think it will go on,' said Jack, only half-believing his own words. 'He feels the disgrace as keenly as we do, I am sure of that. The only thing is the habit may have such a hold on him that he can't leave it off. I don't see what we can do now; we must wait and see how things go on, I suppose.'

It was all they could do. Tell their mother they would not; it was bad enough for them to bear it: it would be worse for her.

'I say, Aleck,' said Jack, lingering at the door, 'I've been thinking; couldn't we do something to help Ross?'

'I wish we could! I would do anything in my power,' said Aleck sorrowfully. 'But what can we do, Jack?'

'Give up drinking intoxicating things altogether! You see there is so much in example and companionship. It might make it easier for poor old Ross.'

'It might,' replied Aleck absently, absorbed in thought. 'It is a chance, at any rate. If I thought it would be of any use, Jack.'

'It may make no difference, but at any rate it is worth the trial,' said Jack.

'Yes, it is well worth the trial. But how will you like it?'

'Not at all,' said Jack, making a grimace. 'I have no fancy for water—ugh!'

'Poor Jack,' said Aleck, with a smile. 'Seeing that companionship makes a thing so much easier, how would it be if I were to follow your example for the sake of helping you?'

'Ross, you mean? Would you care to do it?' And Jack watched his brother's face anxiously.

'Yes,' said Aleck, after a pause. 'I think it is a very good plan. I am glad you thought of it. I wonder I didn't. I have been turning over ways and means all night. It will make it easier for Ross, of course. Yes, we will try it, Jack.'

The matter was settled, and they said no more. At dinner-time, to Mrs. Norman's surprise, two of her boys poured out for themselves glasses of water.

At such an extraordinary proceeding Maggie opened her eyes wide.

'Aleck and Jack are drinking water,' she screamed. 'Mamma, look! they've turned teetotallers!'

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'Shut up, you little idiot,' said complimentary Jack, while Mrs. Norman gave her a reproving look. There was a great prejudice against total abstainers among the higher classes in Eastdale.

'What is the matter with the beer, my dear boy?' she asked, looking at Aleck in some surprise.

'Nothing, mamma. What Maggie has said is quite correct,' he replied calmly. 'The fact is, I have been reading up the subject, and find that the action of alcohol on the system is injurious, so Jack and I have determined to give it up for a time. We are in training for the boat-race, you know.'

Ross's hand slightly shook as he lifted his wine-glass, but he did not look up.

Mrs. Norman looked puzzled.

'I do not understand how that can be. I thought beer and wine were strengthening.'

'Dr. Burton does not tell you so, mamma.'

'No, but he is a—I mean, that is his hobby. He is peculiar in his views.'

'Not at all,' said Aleck, speaking as if he had studied the question for years, instead of one night and morning. 'He is a very sensible, enlightened man; and his views, as you call them, are gaining ground every day. Some of the best men in Eastdale are taking up the question. There is no doubt that it is one with two very decided sides; and I do not believe in studying only one side of a question. I mean to take up the arguments all round.'

Jack's lips began to give way at the corners. He was taking the ludicrous side of the question just then, and it was rather too much for his gravity. Aleck's sudden transition from a somewhat contemptuous anti-teetotaller into an embryo temperance lecturer was more than he could stand.

'Well, do not carry it too far,' said Mrs. Norman, a little disturbed. 'I hope Ross will not think of taking it up! He needs something stronger than water. It does not much matter for you and Jack; you are well enough, and water will not hurt you. But I expect you will soon be tired.'

'Ross must please himself,' said Aleck quietly.

'Dr. Burton said Ross was not to drink wine,' cried Miss Maggie. 'He always has it, though; you will not

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catch Ross giving up his wine! He likes it too well a great deal.'

'What do you mean, you impertinent little thing?' said Ross, colouring with passionate anger. 'You mind your own business!'

'Hush, Ross, my dear boy!' said his mother. 'Maggie, when will you learn to keep your tongue in subjection?'

'So he does like it; it is only the truth,' replied defiant Maggie. 'He cares more for his wine than for anything else. He will be just like Mr. Harborough when he grows up. I hope he won't have a wife and children, that's all.'

All the colour faded out of Ross's face; making a great effort, he took up his knife and fork and went on with his dinner, as if such words were beneath contempt.

Mrs. Norman rebuked her daughter more sharply than usual, but without much effect.

In anything but an enviable frame of mind, Ross went to school. Angry with Aleck and Jack, furious with Maggie, he felt as if life were fast becoming unbearable. How to get through the afternoon he scarcely knew—everything was a trouble. He was glad when at last the bell rang and school was over. Avoiding the boys, he hurried through the playground, anxious to reach home and the solitude of his own room as speedily as possible. At the corner of the road leading to Mr. Harley's shop he hesitated, and finally turned down.

Frank was in the shop, serving a customer.

He coloured and looked troubled on seeing Ross, but nodded pleasantly. Ross waited until the woman had taken her departure, and then sauntered to the counter and sat down.

'How are you getting on?' he asked.

Frank shook his head.

'Not very well; people don't seem to care to come as they used to. We haven't had a dozen in since morning.'

'Why is it? I don't understand.'

'Inferior goods,' said Frank bitterly. 'Who will come here for such stuff as this?' pointing to a barrel of brown sugar.

'Why don't you try better?'

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'For a very simple reason. No one will let us have it. It is just this, Norman; we have neither money nor credit! I am finding it out now. We are struggling along as best we can for a time; but I can see what is before us.'

'What?' asked Ross, looking at the anxious, careworn face, so different from what it had been only one short year ago.

'Bankruptcy!—that is all.'

And Frank turned his head away, and began arranging packets of tea.

'Oh, I hope not. I'll tell you what I will do, Frank; I'll persuade mamma to divide her custom. She deals with Long—always has done; but I can manage that. It will be a little help, and perhaps others will follow her example.'

'Thank you, you are very kind, Norman; but I would rather not. I cannot send bad groceries to your house, and we have no good.'

Ross looked puzzled.

'That makes it bad, of course; there would be no difficulty if you had things as good as Long's. Can't it be managed anyhow?'

'No; I am too young to be responsible and do business on my own account. They naturally look to my father, and he has tired them all out.'

'He is never in the shop now, is he?' said Ross, lowering his voice, and glancing at the curtained glass door leading into the sitting-room.

'Scarcely ever. Hush! he is coming in now.'

The door opened, and Mr. Harley came out. Ross was surprised at the change in him. He had not seen him for a year, and then he had been sober. Now he was in a curious state,—a maudlin, foolish, sodden condition, melancholy to see.

'How do you do, sir?' he said, steadying himself against the counter. 'I hope you are well, sir, and the young ladies, and all the family, especially your respected father. I saw him yesterday, but he did not look very well.'

'Good afternoon, Mr. Harley,' said Ross pityingly. 'Frank and I are having a little talk over various things. He is becoming quite a business man.'

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'Yes, sir; he's a clever boy—a good boy! Very different from his poor old father. I'm a trodden-down man, sir—a poor, miserable, trodden-down man! Everybody is against me!'

And here, to Ross's horror and Frank's speechless shame, he broke down and began to sob and cry, wiping the tears away with his coat-sleeve.

'Go in and sit down, father; do. You are not fit to be here,' said Frank, taking his arm. 'Go in and read the paper; you like the paper, you know.'

'No, no! I like being here best. Leave me alone, Frank. How dare you treat me so? You are like all the rest of them! bad at the core! bad at the core! You have no respect for your poor old father!'

'I have this respect, that I do not care to have him made the laughing-stock of the neighbourhood,' said Frank, making a sudden leap over the counter, and scattering several small boys, who were looking in with open mouths and ears.

'You do not want the boys to shout after you again, father, do you?'

'No, no! don't let them, Frank! there's a good boy. I've been a good father to you, and now I'm poor and trodden down! you won't desert me, will you?'

'No; I will not desert you, father,' replied Frank sadly. 'But you must go into the room, and not come into the shop; I will help you.'

He took his arm, and led him in, giving Ross a sign to stay. In a minute he came back, and went on with his work without speaking.

'Is he often like that?' asked Ross.

'Generally; sometimes worse. Norman'—

'Well?' said Ross, as he paused.

'About last night,' went on Frank hurriedly, turning away his head. 'I must speak, I cannot help it. I have been reproaching myself ever since. I could not sleep for it.'

'You have nothing to reproach yourself for. I was a fool to take so much; but I was so ill—I did not mention it at the time, but I was really ill, Frank, and it takes very little to upset me.'

'Oh, but I do reproach and blame myself. It was I who

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supplied you with that wretched wine and brandy nearly all last year and this. I cannot do it any more, Norman.'

Ross gazed at him, scarcely crediting his own ears.

'What do you mean?' he stammered, with rising anger.

'I cannot help you *down*, Norman—that is all. I dare not do it! With my own father before my eyes, and last night's work on my heart, *I dare not* go another step in that direction.'

'What direction? I think you have taken leave of your senses, Frank!' said Ross haughtily.

'No, I have not. I have only just come to them. I wish I had done it sooner,' said Frank steadily. 'I am sorry to annoy you, Norman; but when a fellow finds he has been doing a great wrong, the least he can do is to stop, and try to retrieve it. I cannot do that, perhaps—retrieve it,—but I can and will stop, and go no farther.'

'I suppose all that rodomontade means practically that you decline to supply me with what I absolutely need—with medicine, in fact.'

'If it were necessary—if it were only medicine, Norman, I should not decline. But it was not that last night.'

'You will never forget that one wretched mishap, I suppose?' sneered Ross. 'A mere accident, which might have happened to either you or Longman.'

Frank was silent: it had not been an accident; he knew that only too well.

'Is that your final decision?' said Ross, rising, and speaking with cool deliberation.

'I cannot help it, Norman; it must be so. I dare not take the responsibility,' said Frank, with pain on every line of his honest face.

'Then I will wish you good evening.'

With a cold nod, Ross walked out of the shop. Frank stood still for a moment, then sprang over the counter and hurried to the door. Ross was half-way down the street.

'That is over, then,' he said, with a sigh, as he went back to his hated work. 'He will never forgive me. I cannot help it.'

The decisive steps taken by Aleck and Jack had not been without effect on Ross. He understood perfectly the meaning

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of it, and resented it deeply. At the same time, he was touched by the brotherly affection which prompted a no small self-sacrifice on their part.

However, his pride rebelled against yielding, and he steeled himself against the prompting of his better nature. At supper-time he drank his usual quantity of wine with apparent indifference and total disregard of the fact that Aleck and Jack were drinking water.

'I don't believe he even knew we were not drinking beer as usual,' said Jack, in despair, as he sat on Aleck's bed later on, and swung his feet in usual Jack-fashion. 'He took no notice whatever, any more than if we had been a couple of cats.'

'Probably less,' said Aleck drily. 'But you are altogether out, Jack. Ross saw and noticed everything; I am sure of that. He put on all that indifference on purpose to blind us. Well, I have made up my mind to give the thing a fair trial, so I shall keep it up.'

'I say, did you mean all that at dinner-time, about the injurious effects, and so on?' said Jack. 'Didn't the little mother open her eyes! She will be expecting to see your name on great yellow bills all over the town. "Mr. Aleck Norman will deliver an address on total abstinence," etc. etc. I thought I should have been obliged to fly from the room! And Maggie's sharp eyes and ears at work all the time. It was too bad, Aleck!'

'I did mean some of it; not all, of course. I think total abstinence a good thing for any one like Ross.' Aleck hesitated painfully, and brought out his brother's name with a jerk. 'He cannot stand much; you know what Dr. Burton said. I suppose his constitution is peculiar.'

'I don't see it. No more peculiar in one way than thousands of others. It is not peculiar to drink too much.'

'Unfortunately, no; but it seems a greater temptation to Ross, or else it takes less to affect him than it would to affect us.'

'It takes much more,' replied Jack, in a low tone; 'he is so used to it. He can drink twice as much as you and I without feeling any effect. That is the worst of it.'

'How do you know?' asked Aleck, his handsome face growing troubled and anxious.

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'I have noticed it; I have watched him a long time. Aleck, I don't know what to do; it is worse than you think. It is no new thing for Ross to take too much; he has done it more than once before.'

'When? Where?' said Aleck, his heart sinking with a dread of coming evil.

'At home—in his own room. I did not mean to tell any one. I hate talking about it; it is like treachery to him.'

And poor Jack dropped his head on the bed-post and hated himself, calling himself traitor.

'It won't do to tell mamma. She would not believe it if we did. Poor mother!'

'But she will have to know if it goes on,' said Jack. 'I am at my wits' end.'

'Not yet. Wait and hope. I will speak to Ross.'

'He won't take it.'

'He must. I am the eldest son, and stand in our father's place. For mother's sake I must speak, Jack,' replied Aleck, with a strange and sudden accession of manliness and dignity. 'For all our sakes,' he added; 'our honour is at stake.'

But, though he spoke so decisively, he found he had set himself a hard task. Again and again he tried to nerve himself for the effort; but Ross's impenetrable face and reserved manner baffled him, and threw him back on himself.

Meanwhile, Ross was cautious.

He did not refuse all invitations out, but he took good care to be abstemious and drink very little. Knowing that by his imprudence, as he called it, he had roused both Aleck and Jack to suspicion and watchfulness, it was his aim now to throw them off guard, and quiet their evident uneasiness. In his own room at night only he relaxed all effort, and pursued his usual course.

Autumn brought early cold winds and wintry days. The evenings drew in, and long before the usual time fires were lighted and warm wraps and rugs brought out.

Cecile felt the change keenly. No longer able to drive out, she was a close prisoner in that little up-stair sitting-room. She was too weak now to walk up and down stairs, or to bear the nervous shock caused by her father's voice and step.

He never came to her room, and she heard little of what

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went on below. Sometimes the tear-stains on her mother's face and Clarice's indignant eyes betrayed a worse outbreak of drunken fury, but they rarely told her.

Dr. Burton called to see Cecile frequently, and was a welcome guest. He was so gentle and fatherly, and withal so earnest and good, that she clung to him as she ought to have been able to cling to her own father.

He knew that she was going fast, that the spring would not find her waiting and watching for its flowers, and his heart ached for them all,—the patient, suffering, insulted mother; the gentle, uncomplaining, dying child; the loving, high-spirited sister. He felt that he ought to warn them of the near, inevitable end; but day by day his courage failed him, and he put it off.

He met Mr. Harborough one day, and followed him into the dining-room, determined to enlighten him as to what was going on in his own household, and see if it would have any effect.

'I am sorry your daughter fails so rapidly,' he said abruptly. 'I doubt if she will get over the winter.'

'What do you mean?' said Mr. Harborough, with an oath. 'You are as bad as the women; they are always croaking.'

'Croaking or not, it is the truth. You will have to face it sooner than you think, probably. Tell me, Mr. Harborough, do you think Cecile really ill?'

'She is delicate, and they make her worse by fussing with her,' was the reply, given with evident uneasiness. 'She has been ailing a long time, I know. Why don't you cure her?'

'Because she is beyond the reach of cure. I thought it as well to tell you the worst; you must know it soon.'

'What do you call the worst? Confound it! why don't you speak out?' cried Mr. Harborough, his passion rising and crowding down his reason.

'Death is the worst, so far as you are concerned,' said the doctor, speaking with reproving dignity; 'the best, so far as it concerns your poor little girl. She is going to the only true Father she has ever known.'

'She has everything she wants,' was the sullen reply.

The doctor looked at him with pitying eyes. 'We were friends once,' he said,—'dear friends in our boyhood; and for

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this reason I have often claimed the right of friendship to warn and counsel. I claim it again now. Cecile is failing fast, and the end is being hastened by you—her father. More than that, I believe that her illness was brought on by you; certainly it has been aggravated and its progress accelerated by your treatment. Under more favourable circumstances she might have succumbed in time, for the seeds of disease were in her; but the probabilities are that she would have lived for years, and perhaps escaped altogether. In no disease so much as in this is perfect tranquillity of mind necessary. It is too late to avert the inevitable consequences of the last twelve months, but you can even now do much to smooth the pathway to the grave for the little tired feet. She is very dear to me, Harborough, and for her sake I ask you to be gentle and kind the last few months, it may be weeks, of her life.'

'She will be all right when the warm weather comes,' said Mr. Harborough, with the incredulity of a man determined not to see the truth.

'Yes; but not in the way you mean.'

And, finding all words apparently useless, Dr. Burton left the house, thinking sadly of the wreck and ruin caused by one man's sin.

But his words had not been entirely without effect; they had at the time disturbed and annoyed Mr. Harborough. He hated the very thought, the mere suggestion of death, and shrank with nervous horror from the idea of its presence in his own house. Some remnant of affection, too, for his child was stirred and roused by the warning given, and with an uneasy mind he went up-stairs to see for himself how far the signs agreed with the doctor's statement.

Cecile was alone. Little expecting a visit from her father, she lay on the couch by the side of the fire, reading her little well-worn Testament. At his entrance she tried to sit up, looking frightened and alarmed.

Mr. Harborough saw the look, and for the first time in his life it sent a pang to his heart. It had come to this: his own child was afraid of him.

Remorse is not always a softening influence, especially when the wrong done is irreparable. The beautiful, etherealized

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little face, the hollow cough and wasted frame, told their own story to the suddenly opened eyes. But it was too late!

'Good evening, papa,' said Cecile gently, trying to hide the terror that would show itself in voice and face.

'How is it you are alone?' he demanded roughly, glad to find something on which to expend the anger rising from his own self-reproach. 'Is this the way they pretend to look after you? Where are they all?'

'Mamma is in the drawing-room with Mrs. Crawford. Clarice has gone to Dr. Winslow's—Grace and Dora came for her. She never goes out, papa, and I begged her to go,' was the eager reply.

'Are there no servants in the house? You shall have a maid to read to you. I will not have you left alone in this manner!'

'I do not like the servants we have now,' said Cecile wearily. 'They are not nice. I like being alone sometimes, papa.'

'All the more reason why you never should be alone! It is a morbid feeling, and does you harm. What are you reading?'

'Only my Testament.'

'Then you have no business to be reading it! filling your mind with gloom! You ought to read amusing books, and you shall, too! I will look some out, and send them up. Why don't you have people up to see you? You will mope yourself to death in this dismal room,' said Mr. Harborough, looking angrily round. 'A den like this!'

'Very few people ever care to come here, papa. I saw Grace and Dora this afternoon. But there are only a few I want to see.'

'Well, send and ask them to come! What's to prevent you, I should like to know?'

'You have forbidden it, papa,' said Cecile, in a low voice.

'Forbidden it! What have I forbidden?'

'I should so like to see Mrs. Norman, and Ross, and Jack, papa!' she replied, the tears springing to her eyes. 'They were so kind to me!'

'Kind! very kind to insult me as that insolent young beggar did! I will not have him in my house! What is the matter with you now?'

She had gone so white that he was alarmed, and looked round for the bell.

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'It is nothing, papa; only that faint feeling which comes so often,' whispered Cecile, leaning back against her pillow.

He stood looking at her for a minute in silence, and then, finding she grew no better, rang the bell.

'Bring up the brandy, and some sugar and water,' he said peremptorily to the servant. 'Make haste! Miss Cecile is ill.'

With a stare of astonishment the girl went down. It was something new for her master to think of any one's wants but his own.

'I would rather not take it, papa,' whispered Cecile, as he took the glass of brandy and water to the couch. 'I cannot take it.'

'You need it!' he said, not unkindly. 'It will do you good and revive you. Drink it up, there's a good child.'

In mute astonishment she put her lips to the glass and drank.

'That is right! drink it all,' he said encouragingly. 'You will feel better now.'

But he found out his mistake. The hot, stimulating drink took away her breath, and brought on a violent fit of coughing. Spurred on to extra exertions by the treacherous spirit, which worked irremediable injury where it was expected to warm and invigorate, the tired, feeble heart sent the blood rushing through the weakened vessels, and the strain was too much for them. The bright red stain on the white pillow told of the mischief done.

Frightened out of all presence of mind, Mr. Harborough rang the bell furiously and shouted for his wife.

All was hurry and commotion. The servants rushed up, alarmed by the unusual sounds from the quiet sitting-room. Crowding round the door, and seeing the little still, white face, with the crimson thread crossing the pale cheek and falling in slow drops on the pillow, they thought that Death had made his sudden claim. Some of them burst into tears, for they loved Cecile, after a fashion of their own.

While Mrs. Harborough and Mrs. Crawford were trying to check the hæmorrhage, Mr. Harborough went down in a tumult of fear and horror.

Briggs was nowhere to be found, and, after calling in vain for the other man-servant, he went out himself in search of the doctor.

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Dr. Burton was snatching a hurried dinner, when a violent ring told him of some one's immediate need of his presence. He did not, however, expect to see Mr. Harborough, and started to his feet with an exclamation of doubt.

'Not Cecile?'

'She is dying, or dead!' said the father hoarsely. 'Come at once! For God's sake, save her if you can!'

Seizing his hat as he passed through the hall, the doctor hastened on with fleet step, leaving Mr. Harborough far behind.

Not knowing what to expect, he went up-stairs, pushing the servants on one side with no gentle hand. One glance told him all, and, though Cecile looked in his face and smiled, he knew that the summons had been given.

When he went down he found Mr. Harborough pacing the dining-room like a caged wild beast, the glass and decanter on the table telling how he had been nerving himself to meet the expected news. He could not speak, but looked the question he dared not ask.

'She is quiet now, and will sleep, I hope. She must not be disturbed.'

'Then she is not'—

'No. You will probably have her two or three days longer —perhaps a week or two.'

'A week or two! Two or three days!' gasped Mr. Harborough. 'Must she die? Can't you save her? I will give you half my fortune if you will save her, Burton!'

'Life is not in my hands; I cannot save her. It is too late!'

'It is too late!'

With these words ringing in his ears, Mr. Harborough sat up till the small hours of the morning, and was carried up to bed dead drunk.

Contrary to all expectation, Cecile rallied sufficiently to sit up and see those of her friends who were most welcome. Her father sullenly withdrew the prohibition against the Normans, and once more she and Ross sat together and talked.

But Ross had not much time even for her. Absorbed in study, he gave himself little recreation and no amusement. His favourite tales were flung unheeded on one side, and nothing but stern necessity drew him out for an occasional

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walk. He was striving hard, too, to keep his growing craving for stimulants within check, and was finding it more difficult than he had imagined.

Its hold upon him was firmer and stronger than he had thought possible. Night after night he resolved to take so much, and no more; but temptation came, and he gave way.

He had sufficient strength of resolution to refrain from taking too much when he was out. The consequences of his last failure had proved a painful lesson. But in his own room, night after night, he drank in secret the draught which was robbing him of all which makes life precious.

The change in him began to attract general notice, and the boys passed their free remarks upon it. Aubrey openly expressed his conviction that Norman major had found a family ghost, and was keeping it locked up in his private room.

'He is haunted, my dear fellow!' he said to Jack. 'There is not a doubt about it. I saw a haunted man on the stage once, and he went about just as Ross does. Sort of dark, mysterious gloom, you know! Ross does not care for anything now. Can't get a civil word from him. You may depend upon it, he has found the family ghost.'

Sheer nonsense, of course, but going home to Jack's uneasy heart. It was no family ghost that Ross had found, but the haunting spirit of his own lost innocence and clear, unsullied conscience.

No suspicion of the truth had as yet found its way into the school. Longman kept his secret faithfully, and Frank, though Ross was no longer a friend of his, was too honourable and true to breathe a word. He had trouble enough of his own to keep his thoughts employed. The dark cloud of an inevitable failure was hanging over the household, giving him neither heart nor time for interest in schoolboys' gossip. He knew nothing of what was going on. Ross he never saw; that one act of his had never been forgiven.

It is a curious fact that the habit of drink will out. No matter how sedulously it is hidden and concealed, some unfortunate moment brings it to light, and undoes the work of months, it may be years. Close as was the watch Ross kept upon himself, the time came when he forgot all caution, and once more he went home the worse for drink. Not as he had

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been before, but boisterous and noisy; as unlike himself as possible.

Where he had been neither Aleck nor Jack knew, but it was not to Longman's. They were both sitting up for him, half dreading his return. He had not been out so late since that last memorable evening. Mrs. Norman went up-stairs at at her usual time; but, with unwonted anxiety, lay awake listening for her boy's footstep.

It came at last. She heard the front door open noisily and shut with a bang. 'So unlike quiet Ross!' she thought, with surprise. Then a fragment of a song reached her ears, and she lifted her head to listen. What could the boys be thinking of to make such a noise?

As the noisy footsteps passed her door, she called gently, and Jack put in his head.

'What is it, mamma?'

'Such a noise, my dear boy!' she said reprovingly. 'Was that you singing?'

Jack hesitated. 'Not much singing, mamma; only a scrap of a chorus.'

'Well, keep it for the day-time. Is Ross all right? Where is he?'

'Gone to bed. Good-night, mother,' was the hurried reply, and Jack withdrew his head and shut the door, leaving Mrs. Norman no time to say any more.

It was useless to speak to Ross that night. He was reckless and utterly defiant, singing and whistling as he sat on the edge of his bed.

Aleck stood and looked at him in despair. 'Let me help you into bed, Ross,' he said.

'Hands off!' replied Ross airily, as he approached. 'Keep your help for yourself, my good fellow; you will need it.'

'What *are* we to do?' said Aleck, looking to Jack for some suggestion. 'We cannot leave him like this. Speak to him, Jack.'

'I don't want a row,' whispered Jack. 'He looks just up for one.'

'Then we had better leave him and wait outside in the passage. Take the key out of the door. Run down and turn off the meter.'

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Jack obeyed, and returning, found Aleck sitting on the floor outside the door. Inside the room they could hear Ross moving about, and every now and then breaking into a snatch of song.

'Here is a rug,' whispered Aleck. 'It is bitterly cold! Wrap yourself up, for here we must stay till he is asleep.'

Rolling himself up in the rug, Jack stretched himself full length along the passage, not seeing the little white figure standing behind him.

It was Miss Maggie, whose curiosity had been excited to boiling pitch by the unusual sounds in the house. Her sharp ears had detected Ross's voice in the scraps of songs, and this alone had been rather more than she could stand. Ross singing, and at night, too! It was incredible!

Then had come noisy, straggling steps, and hushed whispers, and various unaccountable sounds, which meant mystery of some sort, of course.

'I'll find out what they are doing,' she said to herself, with a defiant nod at Jack in spirit. 'They think they can keep everything from me, but they can't!'

Heedless of the cold night air, she slipped out of bed, and, opening her door, glided like Aubrey's ghost down the passage and round the corner. The moon shone full on the boys, and she stood transfixed. What were they doing there?

A strange, unwonted sense of impending evil stole over her, and without a sound she turned and crept back to her own room.

Once more in bed, with the clothes drawn closely round her head, she lay and pondered over the mystery. Why were Aleck and Jack keeping watch over Ross? In vain she racked her quick, clever little brain for a solution; the truth never once occurred to her. Often as she had accused Ross of caring too much for his wine, it had been done more out of a mischievous desire to annoy and irritate him, than from a conviction of the truth.

'Was Ross going mad?' she thought, with a thrill of horror. 'Such things had been. Young Woodleigh had worked himself insane. Suppose Ross were doing the same thing!'

This most feasible solution seemed so probable, that she at once seized it as fact, and, having settled the knotty point, dropped asleep.

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CHAPTER VIII.

CECILE'S DYING REQUEST.

THE next morning Aleck and Ross had a stormy interview. At first Ross was cool and indifferent outwardly, though chafing fiercely inwardly; but, as Aleck argued and urged and entreated, and finally reproached, he grew angry and defiant.

'I am old enough to be my own master! what right have you to interfere?' he said haughtily. 'Be kind enough to leave me to manage my own affairs.'

'It is a family affair; it touches all of us,' replied Aleck. 'You cannot disgrace yourself alone. We shall all feel it. A Norman has never yet been seen drunk!'

'I was not drunk!'

'Slightly inebriated, then,' said Aleck, with ill-timed sarcasm.

Ross turned away in silence, his face white with anger. Not one word more would he utter, and Aleck left him in despair.

'If only papa were alive,' he groaned; 'if ever we needed him it is now. There is no one to help us—not one to whom Ross would listen.'

'And no one we care to tell,' said Jack. 'I would not have Dr. Winslow know for the world.'

'He will know; every one will know soon,' was the gloomy reply. 'I daresay it is known already.'

The same fear was haunting Jack, though he resolutely put it aside. All that morning he fancied the boys were talking of Ross Norman. Every whisper was twisted into something

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bearing on the subject, every glance at him or Ross was one of mocking curiosity.

He was not much surprised, after school, to receive a summons to the Doctor's room; though why he was sent for, and not Ross, passed his comprehension. He found the Doctor in his accustomed place, with the look on his face which he knew only too well.

'Arthur said you wanted me, sir,' he said respectfully, wondering why those keen eyes looked at him so searchingly.

'I do want you, Norman; but it is with no pleasure I send for you or see you. I had hoped never to have such a painful duty with reference to you again.'

'What have I done now, sir?' cried Jack hotly.

'Do not speak in that tone,' replied the Doctor, with marked displeasure. 'I shall ask you no questions, because I have learned how little reliance is to be placed on your word. If you choose even now to speak openly and honourably, as becomes a Norman, I will gladly hear all you have to say; and need I add that I will gladly help you to regain all that, this last sad year, you have lost. But it is no easy thing to regain lost confidence, lost innocence.'

'Was it about Ross again?' wondered Jack. There could be nothing else. Looking up, and meeting the Doctor's grave eyes, he asked the question again, though in a different tone.

'What have I done, sir?'

'When you recall how and where you spent last evening you will scarcely need to ask that question. Norman, I never thought to hear of one of your father's sons reeling home at eleven o'clock at night, intoxicated! singing low songs and attracting the attention of every passer-by! Has it indeed come to that?'

Jack turned faint and sick with shame and dread. His first thought was for Ross and the Rutland, which for the moment he gave up as lost. No boy of sullied character could take it. The conditions were most stringent on that point.

For the moment it did not strike him that Ross was not yet implicated. The mistake was to him so obvious, that it did not seem possible for any one to remain long deceived. The Doctor would surely find it all out before long, and Ross's disgrace would be sealed.

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'For the sake of your mother and brothers I lament that you should so far be lost to all sense of right and honour,' continued Dr. Winslow. 'I shall take no public notice of it at present, solely on their account, chiefly for Ross's sake. A great and overwhelming disgrace, such as a public exposure would be, would, I am afraid, unnerve him and probably cause him to lose the Rutland. But I give you warning, Norman. I shall, after Christmas, take instant steps either to ensure no repetition of last night's disgraceful conduct, or to expel you from the school. You may go.'

Indignant, passionate denial rose to Jack's lips, but was never uttered. A vision rose before him of Ross sitting in the mute agony of failure, watching the bestowal of the Rutland upon Crawford or Forbes! And quick as lightning the thought flashed across his mind, 'Keep quiet till Christmas! It is not long. Bear it a little while for Ross's sake!'

And he was silent! Without a word he left the room, leaving the Doctor puzzled and dissatisfied. He could not make the boy out.

Aubrey was the first to meet Jack; he had been waiting for him impatiently.

'I say, Jack, what's all this about? It isn't true, is it?' he cried.

'What isn't true?' said poor Jack sharply, wondering how much more he was to bear.

'Why, that Aleck was carried home drunk last night?'

'Aleck?' exclaimed Jack, in genuine astonishment. 'Why don't you say the Doctor at once, and have done with it?'

'Well, then, Ross, or you—I don't care which. Dangerfield declares that one of you was seen reeling along the fields last night, singing, "Won't go home till—hiccough—morning!"'

'Dangerfield is a liar!' was all the reply Jack vouchsafed to give.

'No doubt. We are all aware of that. But really, Jack, it isn't true, is it?'

'I wonder you ask the question! How does Dangerfield account for his knowledge? Knowing so much, he ought to know more.'

'One of their servants told him: she saw one of you, so

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she declares, reel into the gate singing some song, and declares you were too far gone to know what you were doing. It's all over the school.'

'Of course! They are only too glad to get hold of some tale! It is just like them. I wonder you pay any attention to such a pack of lies, Aubrey. I shan't condescend to contradict it.'

'Well, I never did quite believe it,' confessed Aubrey. 'Only, you know, Ross is fond of his glass of wine.'

'So am I; so are you, for the matter of that.'

And Jack walked off to avoid further questioning. With a heavy heart he walked home, stopping for a few minutes to speak to Mona on the way.

'Maggie tells me you and Aleck have become total abstainers,' she said, with a smile. 'Is it true, Jack?'

There was amusement in her tone; evidently she thought it one of Maggie's wild tales.

'Yes. It is true. We have been thinking it over, and there is a great deal to be said on both sides, Mona.'

'What does Ross say to it?'

'Nothing,' said Jack shortly.

'He does not join you, then?'

'No. We want him to. Don't you believe in total abstinence, Mona?'

'Not for such as you!' she replied, surprise and a little disdain evinced by her tone.

'Not for such as Mr. Harborough?' asked Jack significantly.

'That is very different.'

'It was pretty much a similar case when he was young. 'As a boy he was like us, I suppose. It would have been well for him if he had never learned to like wine and brandy. Well for his wife and children, too!'

'Yes, but none of you are likely to follow his example. If there were any danger of that I would recommend total abstinence at once,' said Mona saucily. 'You don't feel that way inclined, do you, Jack?'

Richard had come up, and was listening for the answer.

'I feel inclined never to touch a drop of anything of the sort again as long as I live. It has brought misery enough on

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the town. Dr. Burton says Cecile would probably have lived for years, but for her father's conduct. There are Frank Harley's prospects ruined by his father's intemperance. Have you heard the news?'

'What is it?—Mr. Harley's sale? Yes, papa heard of it last week. Will you come in, Jack?'

Jack declined, and walked on; Richard accompanied him.

'Have you heard the rumour in the school?'

'Dangerfield's tale?'

'Yes.'

Richard was silent some moments. 'Look here, Jack,' he said at last, speaking with sudden decision; 'I may as well out with it. You have more influence with Ross than any one else, I fancy, so I speak to you; I would hold my tongue otherwise. You know the rules—the conditions under which the Rutland can be taken? the morality and good conduct ones, I mean. I hate to say it, Jack,' and Richard lowered his voice, 'but I saw Ross last night. I suppose you know all about it.'

Jack nodded.

'If the Doctor hears he will be forced to strike Ross off the list of competitors at once, and a thing like that always does get talked about. Speak to Ross and warn him, will you, Jack? I cannot say anything to him myself; we are not very good friends just now, and it is such a horrid thing to talk about.'

'I will do what I can,' said Jack. 'Thank you for speaking, Richard; it is like you.'

He could not enter into the subject and discuss it, even with him, and Richard fully understood the feeling.

'They say it was you, not Ross,' he went on. 'I did not contradict it; I could not without betraying what I knew. Did I do right?'

'Thank you, quite right. Let them say it was me,' replied Jack, forgetting his grammar in his eagerness to screen Ross. 'I don't care a bit what they say about me. Where did you see him, Dick?'

'Coming out of Parker's gate. Does Aleck know?'

'Yes, he and I. You will not mention it?'

'Only to you. Is it true that you and Aleck have given up beer and wine and all that sort of thing altogether?'

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'Quite true.'

'For Ross's sake, I suppose. How is it he has taken up with Parker again?'

'How should I know?' said Jack crossly. 'He never tells me anything.'

But though Ross had not told him, he had a pretty correct suspicion of the truth.

To the astonishment of everybody, Ross had lately been renewing to a certain extent his old acquaintance with Parker. A change had come over the latter; instead of sneering at and avoiding Ross, he had sedulously sought him all the autumn. He had met him at Longman's, and with altered tactics had spoken enthusiastically of his chance of the Rutland, sneering at Crawford's pretensions and laughing them to scorn.

Too absorbed in himself to be suspicious of Parker's motive, Ross had fallen easily into the snare laid for him. The fact was, he was in no state to discriminate between real and false regard. Wrapt in a blind ignorance of all that did not immediately touch him, he gladly welcomed an acquaintance which promised to be so useful.

That was the secret. He needed Parker's money, so he put up with Parker's company.

Jack had looked on with scorn and suspicion. That Parker hated both him and Ross he knew, and he could not understand his sudden friendship.

He could fathom his brother's motive, for he guessed his need of money, but Parker's was beyond him.

His distrust increased on hearing that it was at his house Ross had been drinking the previous night; and with a gloomy face he wished Richard good morning, and turned in at the gate of the Cedars to see Cecile. He went every day now, often staying to read to her. Richard went home to dinner, and found Maggie there. She was a favourite of his, though he took a boyish delight in teasing her. But to-day he was in no mood for his usual amusement, and he took little notice of her. Maggie did not like it.

'Everybody is getting disagreeable,' she pouted to Mona after dinner. 'Richard is as bad as our boys, and they are nearly always cross now. Ross is horrid.'

'Perhaps he is not well,' said Mona. 'He is working hard, too.'

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Maggie looked cautiously round. They were alone, and the temptation to make a confidant of Mona was too great to be resisted.

'Mona,' she whispered, 'if I tell you something you won't tell, will you?'

Mona laughed. She was used to Maggie's secrets.

'No; I promise faithfully.'

'It is about Ross. He is going mad.'

The solemn, awe-struck tone was too much for Mona's gravity. Her lips trembled with the effort to restrain her laughter; but Maggie's next words sobered her.

'He is, Mona; and Aleck and Jack know it. They sat up outside his door all last night.'

A vague feeling of alarm crept over Mona, and, remembering much that had puzzled her in Ross, she listened to Maggie's tale with an aching heart.

'Don't you think he must be going mad?' asked the child eagerly.

'No; I hope not, Maggie. It is difficult to understand; but I do not think Ross is likely to go mad,' said Mona, speaking with apparent assurance. 'Now you must make me a promise. I want you to say that you will never breathe one word about all this to any one.'

'Only to you.'

'But to no one else. You must not, Maggie. You do not know what harm you may do. Ross will never forgive you if you talk about him to people. Will you promise?'

'Yes,' said Maggie readily enough.

She was not an indiscriminate chatterbox, and, having told Mona, had no desire to tell anybody else.

Mona was perplexed and troubled. That some shadow had fallen on Ross she had seen a long time, but of its nature she had no suspicion.

Maggie's suggestion respecting his sanity she dismissed at once, and then a darker thought took its place. Was this the secret of Aleck's and Jack's sudden total abstinence principles?

The more she dwelt on it the more convinced she became that this was the key to the mystery, and she waited and watched with painful anxiety for further confirmation—or contradiction.

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The next evening Derrick Forbes came in to see Richard, and in the conversation alluded to the rumour of the preceding day.

'If it is true, Norman will lose the Rutland,' he observed.

'If what is true?' asked Mona quickly.

Richard looked annoyed. He would rather she heard the report from any one than from him. Forbes answered, however.

'Hasn't Richard told you? It is not true, of course, but some of them would be very glad if it were.'

'But what is it?' persisted Mona.

Forbes looked at Richard. He was a generous, gentlemanly boy, and hated to repeat the scandal. He wished now he had held his tongue altogether.

'You don't want to hear all the school scandal, Mona,' said her brother, with some irritation. Mona said no more then, she knew her brother.

As soon as Forbes left she returned to the charge, and drew the truth from Richard's reluctant lips.

'Mind, they have only Dangerfield's word for it, and he is the biggest liar in the school,' he said warningly. 'Don't you believe it now,—the report, I mean,—and, Mona, don't repeat it.'

'I am not likely to do so. Dick, tell me, do you believe it?'

'I make a rule of disbelieving everything Dangerfield says.'

'In a general way—yes,' said Mona, her face growing earnest; 'but, Dick, there has been a change in Ross lately. He has been so different. And then, why have Aleck and Jack given up all strong drink, even beer? It is very strange, Dick.'

Her brother looked at her thoughtfully. 'Mona, you were making fun of Jack yesterday because of that. Take my advice, and don't speak in any way disparagingly of total abstinence to Ross. If you do not believe in it yourself, leave others to form an unbiassed opinion.'

'Do you believe in it?' she asked, astonished at his tone.

'I have not studied the question,' was the evasive reply.

'That is not like you, Dick,' she said reproachfully. 'You have formed an opinion, I suppose?'

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'No; my opinion is in a very unsatisfactory condition; I cannot settle it. I believe total abstinence is good for some —for weaker natures.'

'Then it is not good for Ross. He is not a weaker nature. If it is good for one it is good for all, I think; for who can tell which are the weaker natures in that sense? If Ross has failed, it is not because he has what is generally understood by a weak nature.'

'Of course you take up the cudgels for Ross,' said Richard, with good-natured sarcasm. 'But I believe you are right as to your argument. It is impossible to tell which natures are the most likely to yield to the influence of strong drink. Some great and good men have been ruined by it, and no one has any right to say that he or she is secure so long as they drink and like to drink. Now you have my opinion, Mona.'

He laughed, for his words were new to him as well as to her; he was learning his own convictions.

'Then don't you feel secure?'

'Yes, I *feel* secure enough. Most people do till they find out they are in danger. But it does not follow that I have any right to call myself secure. A man may as well say he is certain of crossing the Atlantic in safety, because he has confidence in the vessel which carries him. Do you see what I mean, Mona?'

'Plainly enough. Oh, Dick! if it would help Ross I would never touch a drop of anything intoxicating again as long as I lived!'

'Neither would I,' said Dick quietly. 'Think it over, Mona; we may be able to do something yet. Since you know so much I will tell you this: there *is* danger for poor old Ross. Say nothing about it, but set your feminine wits to work, and devise some plan of help. We will talk it over together, and with Aleck and Jack on our side we may prove stronger than even the powerful spirit of drink.'

With a saddened heart Mona left her brother and went to her own room. The shock was great, and her hero's fall unutterably painful to her sensitive, pure nature. She could scarcely believe that it was true—that it was clever, brilliant Ross of whom she and Dick had been talking; and she would

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have given much to have proved that rumour false!—that horrible, disgraceful rumour!

'Some one must speak to him—reason with him,' she murmured, with hot tears falling fast. 'It is too terrible! Ross intoxicated! Oh, it cannot be true! I wonder if he would listen to me.'

Long into the night she lay thinking and scheming, and dropped to sleep at last from sheer weariness of brain. But during those hours of thought a change took place in her own convictions. She said nothing to her brother for several days; by silent mutual agreement they avoided the subject.

They saw Ross frequently, and his moody face and changed manner told of the work of deterioration within. He no longer sought Mona and took pleasure in her society as of old, but shunned her, and their long pleasant talks were things of the past.

She understood it all now. Mr. Harley's failure was occupying the attention of the town. He had been an Eastdale Grammar School boy, and had entered upon his business life with the goodwill of most of his fellow-townsmen. His was an old Eastdale name, and had been generally respected till late years; and his failure and its cause were pretty freely discussed. There was a sale of the household goods, and the business was made over to an enterprising tradesman in an adjoining street.

In all this trouble Frank was his mother's right hand. He hired rooms, and removed to them such of the furniture as the creditors allowed them to retain. Here he installed his mother and the children, his father of course following.

Pretty little Rose was adopted by an aunt in London, and left her home, bathed in tears. Another relative sent for one of the boys, so that there were only four of the children left at home. Frank took the first thing that offered—a situation in one of the Eastdale shops, where he obtained salary enough to pay their rent and keep himself. Mrs. Harley took in plain sewing, and so, with a small allowance from her brother, she managed to make two ends meet, though it was often hard work enough.

As for Mr. Harley, he took a situation one week, and lost it the next. No one would keep him; indeed, no one could,

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with justice to themselves. He became a hanger-on at home, dependent on his wife, seizing every farthing he could lay his hands on to spend in drink. It was a wretched home.

All Frank's real friends rallied round him; but he looked in vain for Ross. Jack went down and gave his sympathy and boyish encouragement freely enough. He had forgiven his share in Ross's dereliction from the path of uprightness; for Frank had told him of his bitter regret.

On hearing of the sale, Ross's first impulse had been to go to Frank; but pride and resentment had stepped in and stopped him. He could not forget or forgive.

One by one he was dropping his old friends, and becoming daily more isolated. The change was too apparent to pass unnoticed, even by the Doctor himself.

'What is the matter with Ross?' he asked his son one day, and Arthur hesitated before answering.

'What makes you think anything is the matter with him father?'

The Doctor looked surprised.

'Several things lately. You must have noticed the change in him, surely.'

'Yes, I have; but I have not cared to speak about it. Ross and I are not friends.'

'Whose fault is that?'

'Not mine,' said Arthur truthfully. 'He has cut all his old friends. It's the Rutland, perhaps; he is determined to do or die.'

'He ought to be too sensible to risk everything for even the Rutland. But his face tells of more than study, Arthur; there is some trouble, unless I am greatly mistaken. I wonder if he is troubled about Jack.'

Arthur looked up in quick astonishment. 'Jack! Why should he be troubled about Jack? It's more likely the other way on!'

The Doctor looked searchingly at his son. 'Do you mean that, Arthur?'

'Certainly I do! I should like to know why you have taken such a dislike to poor Jack, father. What has he done?'

'I have not taken a dislike to him; I like the boy. But he has forfeited my confidence.'

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'I cannot make it out,' said Arthur, much puzzled. 'If it had been Ross, now.'

'Ross! how could it be Ross?' said the Doctor, surprise in every line of his face. 'Ross is not very likely to cause trouble, except on the score of health; neither is it probable he will forfeit my confidence.'

Arthur bent over his books with an odd look in his eyes, but made no reply.

There were visitors there that evening, and the Doctor was destined to receive another surprise. One of his guests, a talkative old lady, beckoned him to her side.

'Come and tell me about that nice boy of yours,' she said. 'Is he going to take off this grand exhibition?'

'Arthur? Oh no,' replied the Doctor, with a smile of amusement. 'He is not on the list of competitors at all.'

'Oh, that is one of your old-world notions! You would not enter your own son for fear you might be charged with partiality and helping him. That is just like you, Dr. Winslow. Who is the fortunate boy, then?'

'I cannot say; there are three who stand pretty high. One is a son of Mrs. Norman.'

'What! the clever one, of course? What a pity he is turning out so unsteady. It must be a great trouble to his poor mother,' said the old lady compassionately.

'Unsteady? Ross is not unsteady. What tale have they been telling you, Miss Watson?'

'Is it a tale? I am very glad. I heard it as fact, I'm sure. My nephew told me; and he had it from one of the schoolboys. He said the clever young Norman was getting dreadfully unsteady—had actually been seen intoxicated. How shocking to make up such tales!'

'It was made up as far as Ross is concerned,' said the Doctor gravely. 'Contradict it when and wherever you please, Miss Watson.'

He walked away, feeling unusually vexed and annoyed. It seemed hard that innocent Ross should bear the stigma of Jack's offences.

But this state of things could not continue long. Ross was becoming strangely careless. The fact was, he was completely mastered by the fatal habit, which was growing

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stronger every day. He lived only to gratify the thirst which was consuming him with its burning intensity, and to win the Rutland.

Excited beyond all bounds, his brain worked brilliantly, and he looked forward with exultation to the time when, standing proudly before masters and school-mates, he would take as his just right the coveted exhibition. Already he felt the sweet consciousness of power, the sense of superiority. He knew that he was capable of more brilliant things than Crawford or Forbes, and the knowledge brought a glow of triumph into his worn face.

Remembering Crawford's warning, Jack sought an early opportunity to remind Ross that the Rutland depended not alone upon intellectual superiority. It was an ungracious task, and he hesitated before making up his mind to undertake it.

All the free, pleasant, brotherly friendship had ceased to be, and he knew that he was looked upon as a spy, and oft-times intruder. Nevertheless, for Ross's sake he determined to tell him of the current rumours, and his consequent precarious hold upon the exhibition. It was not his yet; it might never be.

An opportunity soon presented itself, and with the headlong impetuosity of desperation he plunged into the painful subject. Ross listened in silence, his sensitive face working nervously, and his lips taking the curve Jack knew and hated.

'You are very kind to trouble about it,' he said coldly. 'I will take care not to violate the condition of morality, or whatever you call it. Dr. Winslow knows better than to believe reports.'

'Is it a report? *You* know better than that, Ross.'

'I have done nothing to forfeit the Rutland. A little drop too much once or twice in a lifetime does not make a man a villain. I did not expect you to turn against me, Jack.'

Ross's voice changed, and for the moment he looked so like his old self that Jack felt a sudden rush of hope.

'I have never turned against you, old fellow,' he replied eagerly. 'You are quite mistaken. But I could not hear you talked about and not tell you. If you lose the Rutland I

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shall be as disappointed as you. Don't lose it, Ross; I believe it all depends upon this one thing now. Crawford thinks so too; he told me to tell you. He said the Doctor would be forced to strike your name off the list of competitors if certain things came to his knowledge. Ross, the disgrace would be worse than defeat.'

'There shall be neither,' was the proud reply; and Ross believed it. In his heart he believed that success was certain; and, though he blamed himself for what he termed his indiscretion, he had no fear for the future.

'So you are going to lose the Rutland after all,' said Parker later on in the day. 'Forbes and Crawford are crowing, I can tell you. What a fool you must be to let them have it, Norman!'

Stung by the sneer, Ross replied contemptuously that failure was no part of his plan. Parker laughed, and with evident delight repeated the school gossip, working Ross up to fury.

'Dear little boy! He must sign the pledge then,' he said mockingly. 'He mustn't drink anything stronger than ginger-beer—the very mildest. I have some at home, Norman; come and taste it; the children like it.'

Ross did go home with him, but not to taste the nursery drink. He and Parker sat in the billiard-room drinking, not even wine, but brandy and water, till a late hour. Sitting in the warm room, excited by topics which Parker knew only too well how to introduce into the conversation, Ross had no idea how much he was drinking. Again and again his companion's stealthy hand filled up his glass, while he was thinking only of the game. He was winning money, and that was sufficient. Elated by his repeated triumphs, he rose at last, sweeping the cards aside.

'I will come in to-morrow night, and give you your chance of revenge,' he said unsteadily. 'It is late; I must go now.'

With an evil smile Parker took him to the gate, and watched him out of sight.

'Not much chance of the Rutland for you,' he murmured, as he returned to the hot room. 'A month's time, and it will be over.'

And now, having no further need of caution, he filled him-

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self another glass of his favourite drink, and throwing himself in an easy chair took out a case of cigars. An hour later he was carried up to bed.

Ross went home unconscious of all; his very gait betrayed. Opening the door with a careless hand, he half-staggered into the drawing-room, where Mrs. Norman and Jack were sitting.

'Hush, my dear!' said his mother as he noisily entered. 'You will awake the house. Where have you been?'

'Where have I been?' he repeated thickly, staring at her with perplexed eyes. 'That's a good one! As if you didn't know!'

He had some sort of a dim consciousness that he had better not tell where he had been; but he did not know why.

'Ross!' exclaimed his mother, rising in her alarm. 'What is the matter? You are ill!'

She put her hands on his arm, but he shook her off.

'Le'me alone,' he muttered; 'I'm going to bed. Where's my lamp?'

'Oh, Jack!' cried Mrs. Norman piteously; 'what is the matter with him? You must go for Dr. Burton. My poor boy!'

And she followed him in his unsteady walk to the door, all her mother's love and fear roused to the utmost.

Jack stood rooted to the spot. It had come at last, the inevitable exposure. His mother's cry roused him, and in a moment he was by her side.

'Leave him to me, mother; I know all about it. He is ill, but not very. I know all about it, I tell you! He will be quite well in the morning.'

He pushed her on one side, roughly for him, thinking only of sparing her the pain of further knowledge.

'Leave him to you when he is ill! You do not know what you are saying, Jack!' she cried, in her trouble and grief. 'I shall not leave him. My poor suffering boy!'

She went up-stairs, following closely her boy's staggering footsteps, and touching him lightly with her hand, as if she would help him.

In his own room he threw himself heavily on the bed, regardless of his muddy boots. She drew them off tenderly, her tears falling fast the while.

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'Oh, Jack, you must go for Dr. Burton! It may be a question of life and death. I have never seen him like this before.'

Jack looked at her in amazement. Could it be possible that she did not recognise the truth? He could scarcely believe it.

'But I have seen him just like this, mamma, and so has Aleck. Go and ask him; tell him to come here,' he said gently.

Yes. She turned instinctively to her right-hand boy in her pain. He could help her perhaps.

She went to him and awoke him, telling him that Ross was ill, and he must come.

He rose at once, and throwing on his dressing-gown went to the room. Jack looked up as he entered, and as their eyes met he knew the truth. He stood beside the bed, looking down on Ross, who was already half-asleep.

'He is not ill, mother dear,' he said, putting his arm round her protectingly as she stood trembling by his side. 'It is excitement partly; he has been out, you know, and it takes so little to excite him. He has been like this once or twice before, but he will be all right in the morning. I assure you it will be so, mother.'

His truthful voice gave her confidence, and she felt the weight lifting from her heart.

'He must have been ill! They have given him brandy,' she murmured, bending over the unconscious boy, and pressing her lips to cheek and brow.

'I shall not leave him, Aleck; I will sit in the easy chair, and then I shall be ready if he wakes and wants anything. The chair is very comfortable, and I daresay I shall fall asleep. You must go to bed, both of you.'

They looked at each other in dismay, thinking of the morning, and what it might possibly bring.

Then Aleck reasoned with her, using all his power of persuasion, and she yielded, stipulating that she should be called at once if Ross grew worse.

'I leave him in your charge, Aleck,' she said. 'Take care of him! I shall not sleep, remember; so do not hesitate to call me.'

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She went to her own room, and, wrapping himself up, Aleck threw himself on the couch and went to sleep. Early the next morning Mrs. Norman was at her post, and her anxious face was the first sight that met Ross's eyes when he awoke.

'What is the matter?' he said, starting up in alarm. 'Why are you here, mamma?'

'You came home ill, my darling!' she said soothingly. 'Lie still and rest. Tell me how you feel.'

He lay back with an expression she did not understand.

'I am all right! It is time to get up.'

'Indeed no! You must not think of getting up! I can tell by your face that you feel ill. Is it your head, Ross?'

'Yes,' he murmured, turning away his face. 'My head aches fearfully.'

'I knew it. You must lie perfectly still, and I will fetch you a cup of tea. What brought on this attack? Where were you last night?'

'I went home with one of the fellows. I can't talk, mamma.'

'No, my poor boy, of course not. You shall tell me all about it when you are better.'

She went to see about tea, and returning found him up and dressed. In vain she expostulated and entreated. He listened with an expression so new to her, so sullen, yet so anxious and determined, that an indefinable foreboding of evil struck her with sudden force.

He vouchsafed small explanation of his conduct the preceding night. He had been taken ill, and they had given brandy; he supposed a little of it had got into his head. He could not stand much.

With that she was obliged to be content. No idea of the truth crossed her mind; she had perfect confidence and faith in her boys.

The friendship between Mona and Cecile had deepened into a very close and tender love. Day by day they sat hand in hand, speaking low of the beautiful home across the threshold of which the little feet were so soon to pass. Very precious were these conversations to Cecile. She dared not touch the topic with her mother or Clarice; they could not bear it; but

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to Mona she spoke freely, and it seemed as if the nearness of heaven tinged every thought with its own purity and beauty.

With the quick insight of love, she saw the cloud on Mona's face, and tried to draw from her its cause. At first Mona's loyalty refused to let her speak of her hero's fall; it was too great a grief for words. But, with strange intuition, Cecile touched so near the truth, that one day she told her all.

'I don't know why,' said Cecile dreamily, 'but for some time I have felt that trouble has come to Ross. I have watched him, and seen the change; and, Mona,' she said, her voice sinking to a whisper, 'I have seen that look in his eyes!'

'What look?' said Mona wonderingly.

'The look which only comes to those who drink. I cannot describe it, but I have seen it. I know it. Mona, Ross must not, shall not, wreck his life! I cannot bear it!'

She sat up, her face burning and her blue eyes shining with excitement. Mona was frightened.

'Hush, Cecile! you will hurt yourself. I ought not to have told you. Oh, why did I tell you? Cecile, I shall never forgive myself if any harm comes to you.'

She bent over the bed, where Cecile, panting and coughing, lay back among her pillows.

'I want to talk about it, Mona. I must,' she said eagerly. 'I shall be better in a minute.'

But there was no more talking for her that day. As Mona wished her good-bye, she whispered,—

'A thought has come to me, Mona. I will tell you to-morrow. Ross must not wreck his life.'

There was confidence in her tone, and faith in the grave and gentle eyes. Mona went home comforted.

Long after she had gone Cecile lay thinking.

The hall-door opened noisily, and, hearing her father's voice, she raised her head and looked round. Mrs. Harborough was sitting by the fire.

'Mamma.'

'My darling! do you want anything?'

'I want to see papa,' came the unexpected answer. 'Will you fetch him, please?'

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The first wild thought which entered the mother's heart was that her child was dying.

'Cecile! my precious child!' she cried, with swift alarm. 'Do you feel worse?'

'No, better. Will you tell papa, please? I must see him to-night, mamma.'

'Are you equal to it, my darling?'

'Quite.' And she put both her arms round her mother's neck. 'Tell him I want him just for one minute.'

Mrs. Harborough went down-stairs. Her husband was glancing over some letters, and she stood still till he had finished.

'Robert, Cecile very much wishes to see you for a few minutes, if you can come,' she said, her voice almost failing.

'Cecile! What is the matter? Is she—?'

He could not get out the dreaded word.

'No; she seems a little better to-night. She is very anxious to see you.'

He hesitated; evidently a conflict was going on within. He did not like to refuse the request of his dying child; but he hated and dreaded the interview. He was rather more sober than usual, or probably he would have refused finally.

As it was, he went up-stairs. Cecile put out her hand with a curious mixture of fear and confidence.

'Thank you for coming, papa. I want to ask you one or two questions. May I?'

'Ask what you like,' he said quickly, withdrawing his hand from the hot, eager touch.

There was silence in the room, while the child tried to find words for the thoughts within her.

'Papa,' she said at last, and her voice was full of wistful yearning, 'would it have made any difference to the present time, to you and us, if you had not learned to love wine when you were a boy?'

The strange question took him by surprise. He stood in silence, repeating the words to himself.

'Won't you tell me, papa?' she cried, half-rising in her earnestness. 'I have thought, and thought, and I want you to tell me, would it have made any difference to the present time?'

'Would it?' He asked himself the question.

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'If they had never taught you to like it—if you had grown up without liking it,' she went on feverishly, 'would you then have done as you have done, papa?'

'Leave the past alone,' he said huskily.

'Ah, I cannot. Won't you tell me, papa?' she sobbed.

'Hush! It would have made this difference, Cecile. I should never have given myself up, body and soul, to a curse! Child, my life's ruin began when I was a boy. Are you satisfied?'

He stopped and looked into her face, his eyes full of despair. She put both her arms round his neck, and kissed his forehead and cheek and burning lips.

'Good-bye, papa.'

'Good-night, my Cecile.'

He went down-stairs, a storm of anguish sweeping over him.

'My life's ruin!' he groaned. 'Oh, God! what torture in the words!'

A torture he could not bear; he drank long and fiercely that night to drown his thoughts, and reeled to bed in the early hours of his child's last day on earth.

The morning rose, dull and cheerless,—a cold and dreary November day. Cecile lay at rest; not sleeping, but at times scarcely conscious. Her mother and Clarice never left her.

At noon Mona came, and bent over her with loving words.

'You know me, Cecile?'

A smile answered the question, and then a gleam of eagerness lit up the quiet eyes.

'Is school out yet?'

'Yes, just out; the boys are coming home. Whom do you want to see, my darling?' said her mother, coming from the window.

'Is Dick there?'

'Yes, and Arthur. They are coming with Jack to ask how you are. Would you like to see them? or only Dick?'

'All. I am glad,' said Cecile, with quiet satisfaction.

They came up, but stood awed by the presence of death. Jack was the first to speak.

'Cecile,' he said, with a checked sob,—'dear Cecile;' and then his voice failed, and he dropped his brown head on the pillow by her side.

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She smiled, and touched his rough curls gently.

'I am so glad you have come, and Dick and Arthur; I want to speak to you.'

They waited, listening reverently, and presently the weak voice went on, full of unconscious pathos.

'A life's ruin is begun so early. Jack, will you promise me that your life shall not be ruined as other lives have been? Dear Jack, you know what I mean; there is only one way.'

'Only one way of being perfectly secure,' said Jack, raising his head. 'I have thought it out, Cecile. It is easy to promise.'

'Yes; I knew *you* would.'

And then her eyes wandered wistfully to Richard and Arthur, who stood behind.

'I do not quite understand,' said Arthur gently. 'What do you wish us to promise, dear?'

'To place yourself beyond temptation,' she replied entreatingly. 'To give up touching all intoxicating drinks at once and for ever. They may never hurt you; you cannot tell. The best are sometimes the first to fall. But I want you to promise—if not for your own sakes, for the sake of others.'

They knew what she meant. Richard's voice shook, as he stooped to answer.

'Mona and I have done it; we made up our minds this morning. We were going to tell you. Cecile, we have vowed to give up all strong drinks for ever!'

She looked at Mona and smiled.

'For the sake of others; you will never regret it. Arthur?'

He hesitated. 'It is no light thing to promise, Cecile; I scarcely know what it involves. But one thing is certain—it can do no harm. I will think it over, and if I find duty and right point in that direction, I will follow. Is that enough, dear?'

The troubled look had come back, and she turned her head towards the door expectantly.

'Does not right point to safety? Where is Ross?'

A sudden light broke upon Arthur; and, as was often the case with him, a sudden resolve followed. He had long known of the step Aleck and Jack had taken, and had approved it. Mona and Richard had somewhat surprised him,

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but his heart told him they were right, though he hesitated to follow their example. He was wondering what his father would say, and others who held such views in ridicule, when Cecile's wistful look and words told for whose sake she was seeking their promise. And then he made up his mind.

'Ross has gone home; I will fetch him. But, Cecile, first I promise.'

She looked up with a glad smile. It would make it so much easier for Ross to have them all banded with him.

But there was a change already in the weary little face, and Mrs. Harborough sent them from the room.

'She is tired,' she whispered. 'It has been too much for her.'

They went out together, Mona only staying behind.

'You will tell Ross,' said Arthur to Jack. 'It will be better for her to see him alone than with us.'

He did not explain his meaning, but they understood. He was careful for Ross's pride. There was no more generous, noble boy in Eastdale than Arthur Winslow.

They did not speak of Ross, but each knew that the other had him in his thoughts. Jack went home and told him that Cecile wanted him; but though he went at once he did not see her. He never saw her alive again. She died that evening.

Mr. Harborough was at the bank. He could not rest at home; the shadow and stillness were insupportable.

At the sound of the doctor's well-known footstep he looked up, with a foreboding of the truth. Dr. Burton shook his hand, but did not speak. He had come straight from the presence of death, and the memory of the still, sweet face, and the little, quiet hands, for ever at rest, was very vivid. Still! no glare of gas and busy stir of life had power to deaden it.

'It is scarcely tidings that I bring,' he said slowly. 'You have been expecting it so long; you knew it was at hand.'

'Then she *is* gone?'

The horror in the tone shocked and surprised his hearer.

'Gone home—yes.' He could not feel even pity for the man who had deserted wife and child in their anguish and loss; who had gone from the house where his child lay dying without one word of inquiry or care. He knew nothing of

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the agony and remorse which were playing out their parts within.

But they were not long allowed to torture the wretched man. Refusing to hear another word about his child, he shut himself in his private room, and drowned all thought and memory in the drink which had already proved so treacherous in its promise of Lethe.

In vain his wife sent to know his wishes respecting Cecile's last resting-place. He returned answer that they were to do as they liked; he did not care what they did.

Dr. Burton took upon himself then the management of everything. Nearly all Eastdale crowded to the funeral, and many were the tears shed over the grave. There was something very pathetic in the thought of the young life so full of care and sorrow as to make its ceasing a welcome rest. For the home-life at the Cedars was no secret, and indignation against Mr. Harborough was hot and strong.

It had been feared that Mr. Harborough would refuse to attend the funeral. Until the very day he refused to hear one word on the subject. He kept almost entirely in his private rooms at the bank, seeing no one but the manager, and Briggs, who waited upon him.

There were rumours afloat that he passed the time in drinking; probably they were true. Dr. Burton attempted to see him once, but was refused admittance.

On the morning of the funeral he made his appearance at the house, looking worse than he had ever done before. Even then he had not been able to refrain from drinking, though he had endeavoured to keep within the bounds of common propriety. He was not intoxicated, but he was not quite himself.

He would not see Cecile, but remained down-stairs, out of sight and hearing, till they came to tell him all was ready. Then, without glancing right or left, he hurried into the carriage. It was strange what a horror he had of death.

Many of the grammar school boys were there, among them Arthur and Richard, and the Normans. Ross looked wretchedly ill, though he tried hard to hide it. He felt Cecile's death more than he had thought possible; but the grief was deadened by the pressure of other troubles and cares. Even during the

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solemn service his thoughts wandered to other scenes, and he saw himself standing victorious before the assembled school. With a start of shame and self-reproach he came back to the present. And then his eyes fell upon Mr. Harborough, and with mingled interest and dislike he watched his face. It was bloated and disfigured—all its beauty gone. There had been a time when he was called the handsomest man in Eastdale.

'And drink has done it all!' thought Ross. 'I wonder if it would alter me as much?'

He tried to realize himself with the stamp of the drunkard on his face, but could not do it. It was too horrible. It was a relief to pass once more into the world of school, and bury himself in his books.

Some of the boys were whispering near him, and he caught the words.

'He took to drink when he was a boy, and it grew upon him.'

They were speaking of Mr. Harborough, but the words went home to his heart.

'I wish you would stop that noise,' he said angrily. 'How is one to study with such a confounded row?'

They shrugged their shoulders, and glanced meaningly at each other as they resumed their work.

Crawford came to him at the close of school, asking him to spend the evening with him and Mona.

'Mother and father are out, so we shall be alone,' he said. 'It is a long time since you spent an evening with us, Ross; and Mona has a message for you from Cecile.'

He did not feel inclined to hear it, but could not refuse.

'I cannot afford a whole evening. I will come home with you and leave early,' he replied, surprised at the invitation. He and Richard had been drifting apart of late.

They walked home together, and Mona greeted him as if no break had come in their friendship. She had not seen him, except passing, for many weeks, and until she had learned the truth from Maggie and her brother had felt deeply hurt. All things were understood now.

The task before her was not a pleasant one, and she shrank from it painfully. But it could not have been entrusted to

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better hands. Sensitive and sympathetic to a degree, she entered into and fully understood Ross's position. If Cecile's message could be given without rousing his pride and wounding him, it could be given by her.

'She wanted to see you, Ross. It was a great disappointment that you did not come with the others,' she said, tears rising as she spoke of Cecile. 'She could not see you afterwards, she was too ill. But she spoke to me, and sent a message. I have been wanting to give it you, but you never came.'

'I have been so busy,' he muttered. 'The examinations are near.'

'Yes, I know. I suppose you will get the Rutland? Dick says so, and he is likely to know. I am glad for your sake, Ross.'

'And sorry for Dick's,' he answered, smiling.

'Yes, I am sorry. But he has not set his heart upon it as you have, and disappointment does not mean so much to him. He hopes you will get it. I shall be glad when it is all over.'

'Why?'

'Because I am afraid you are making too much of it, Ross; it is such a strain upon you. Mrs. Norman is so anxious about you.'

'Oh yes! mamma is always nervous,' he answered lightly. 'But, Mona, we have wandered from our subject.'

Richard had left them, thinking it would be better and easier for Mona if he were not present. She felt more confidence as she went on.

'You know all about her father, how he has treated them, and what he made of their life. But, Ross, you have no idea what it was to Cecile; it was bad enough for all, but worse for her. She was weak physically, and so sensitive. She used to tremble at the sound of his footsteps. Can you wonder that she grew to hate the thing that had made him what he was? Ross, she hated the very sight of wine and brandy, indeed of all intoxicating drinks. Nothing could induce her to touch a drop—except her father's will; he forced it on her once. And then she wanted to do something to prevent others from doing as he had done, and it came into her head to beg her own especial friends to make a stand against it all their

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lives. She asked us to promise not to touch what had been the curse of her life as long as we lived, and we could not refuse. Arthur and Dick were there, and Jack, and we all promised.'

Ross knew what was coming, but he made no sign. Mona watched his face anxiously as she paused, but could learn nothing, and went on.

'She wanted Aleck and you, especially you, for you were her friend, and she had such faith in you. She told me, after the others had gone, that she wanted you to fight for her sake against the dreadful power of drink, and make it part of your life-work.'

Not one word that could lead him to imagine that Cecile had known of the dark shadow upon him. Still he did not speak.

'She wanted a little band of us to bind ourselves to work against the cause of so much misery and suffering. You cannot wonder she had that in her heart, Ross. She had suffered much, and knew what drink could do.'

'No; I do not wonder.'

'And so she made us promise, and we have banded together to do our utmost all through our lives to lessen the power of drink. I never used to think about it, but lately it has been forced upon me, Ross,' and her voice sank. 'They say she would have lived if her life had been different.'

Still Cecile and Mr. Harborough. Ross drew a deep breath; he had been dreading he scarcely knew what, but now he began to breathe freely.

'Her message to you was begging you, for her sake, to do as we have all done. Will you, for her sake, Ross?'

She listened with breathless anxiety for the answer. It came, cool and collected.

'I will think about it. Thank you, Mona.' And that was all. There were burning tears of disappointment in Mona's eyes as he wished her good-night. He did not wait for Richard to come in again, but left at once.

Many and bitter thoughts crowded through his mind as he walked home. A wild longing to join them and cast off the chains that bound him took possession of him. He felt so desolate and alone in his isolation from his old friends.

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Arthur too; he had not expected that. He envied them, but he could not join them, he dared not.

As he drew near the Cedars he heard hasty steps behind him, and Dr. Burton overtook him. The lamplight shone on his face, and Ross saw something there that made his heart beat quicker.

'Is anything the matter at home?' he asked, his voice betraying the sudden fear.

'Not at your home, Ross,' said the doctor solemnly, placing his hand heavily on the boy's shoulder. 'Thank God to-night that you are not under the dominion of strong drink. Mr. Harborough is dead.'

With a cry of horror Ross turned his white face towards him.

'Dead! How?'

'By what is called a stroke of apoplexy. The world will satisfy itself with that, and seek to know no more.'

'What more is there to know?'

'All that the words imply. Would you know? I will tell you, Ross. Mr. Harborough is as surely a suicide as if he had thrown himself over yonder bridge.'

'But I thought a stroke might come to any one,' gasped Ross, unable fully to realize it all.

'Have I said otherwise?' said the doctor, stopping at the gate. 'What I do say is this, in Mr. Harborough's case it was the result of a long-continued habit of drink. He drank himself to death. That is the literal truth.'

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CHAPTER IX.

'GONE! THE ONE CHERISHED DREAM OF MY LIFE.'

ALL Eastdale was stirred by the news of Mr. Harborough's death. It cast a gloom over the town, for he was well known, and in past years had been respected and liked.

The shock to his wife was great. She gave way and sank into a nameless, exhaustive illness, which taxed her little remaining strength to the utmost. Clarice was her devoted nurse, scarcely ever leaving her side. Mrs. Norman, too, was with her almost constantly, and the friendship between the two grew closer than ever it had been.

Days passed, and still Ross made no reference to the subject so near to Mona's heart. He saw her occasionally, but only for a few minutes. The fact was, he shunned her, and she saw it, with pain and wounded feeling. It was hard to be avoided and shunned by him! But it was harder to see the change that had come over him, and to know that her knight, *sans peur et sans reproche*, was unworthy himself! It was a bitter truth, a heavy disappointment.

It seemed as if the nearness of the examination day made Ross more reckless than before. Sure of success, he exulted and triumphed with the excitement due to an over-worked brain. He could not keep cool or control his nervous agitation.

Dr. Burton cautioned him, but the words were thrown away. Aleck and Jack watched him with anxious pain; he was so altered, so unlike their chivalrous, gentle Ross!

But even they saw little of what was going on. Ross had

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learned one lesson from his past experience—that of caution. He did not come reeling home now at night, with the flush of intoxication on his face, and coarse songs on his lips. He knew better than that, and held himself in check. But since his mother had spent so many of her nights at the Cedars, he had more than once sent word home that he was staying with a schoolfellow, and they were not to expect him back that night. Jack knew pretty well where he was, but kept the knowledge to himself.

'It is no use bothering mamma,' he said to Aleck. 'It will be all over in a week or two. Once Ross is free from Eastdale and his present set, he may alter.'

'Or go on to worse,' said Aleck. 'I never yet heard of college life making a fellow steady when he was the other way inclined! Don't let your wishes run away with your sense.'

'If he would but join us! If he would give up that wretched drink!' groaned Jack, flinging his books across the table in his anger. 'Why in the world wasn't he at the Cedars that morning instead of one of us? He could not have refused Cecile!'

'He has refused her, and Mona too, which surprises me more. I thought, if any one could do it, she could. Jack, do you know, I fancy we have been on the wrong tack lately. We have been too careful of his feelings. It was all very well at first; but, seeing that all our efforts failed, we ought to have done something more decisive and effectual. What is the use of thinking so much of his pride and his feelings, and yet letting him go on to what would be far worse than anything we could say or do? The truth is this, Jack, and we must face it. An exposure is inevitable unless he stops short now. It is the sort of thing which nothing can hide; he will betray himself soon. It would be greater kindness on our part to use any means whatever to stop him.'

'What do you think of doing?' asked Jack anxiously, looking as if he expected Aleck to propose some torture for Ross.

'Don't be a fool,' said Aleck sharply. 'Isn't he my brother as well as yours? I am not likely to hurt him! I have been thinking that we ought to tell some one—Dr.

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Burton or Dr. Winslow—in confidence, of course, and get them to speak to him. It will be better for one of them to know now, in confidence, than for the whole world to know later on, and it is coming to that.'

Jack was silent. Aleck's words were sensible enough, as indeed they generally were. And yet the idea of telling any one of Ross's horrible disgrace went to his very heart. In Jack's eyes drunkenness was one of the blackest of sins.

'I tell you what we will agree to do, Aleck,' he said suddenly. 'Let us wait till after the examination. Any row now would upset Ross dreadfully, and make him lose the Rutland. Let us wait till that is all over, and then we will tell some one—unless Ross gives it up,' he added. 'We will not do anything underhand, Aleck. We will tell old Ross what we mean to do, and if he likes to put a stop to it he can.'

'Of course! I would much rather he knew,' said Aleck, with a sigh. 'Well, let it remain for the present, Jack. Perhaps you are right, and he may change after the examination.'

The conversation dropped, but it had put a thought into Jack's head which had never entered it before. Was it right for Ross to take the Rutland at all?

In vain he tried to bury himself in his books, and lose himself in his work. The question would rise, forcing its way to the front, and compelling attention. If the conditions were so uncompromisingly severe, if only a boy of unblemished character could take the Rutland, what right had Ross to enter himself as a competitor. What right had he to take it from boys of such high, untouched morality, such stainless lives as Richard and Derrick Forbes?

The rules and conditions of the exhibition had been given to each competitor, and, anxious to see for himself the exact wording of this especial clause, Jack went up to Ross's room to see if he could find it. It was on the desk, and had evidently been recently looked at. Wondering if the same thought concerning it had occurred to Ross, Jack sat down and opened it. He was still reading it, taking in the full meaning of the uncompromising words, when Ross came in.

His face changed as he glanced at the paper.

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'What are you looking at?' he asked, his voice betraying annoyance.

Jack ran his finger along the clause.

'That,' he said briefly.

Ross glanced over his shoulder.

'Well, what of it?'

'That is not for me to say,' was the quiet, half-sad reply.

For the first time in his life Jack heard a fierce oath from his brother's lips.

'What do you want to come prying among my papers for? Confound you! Keep to your own affairs, and leave mine alone!'

He tore the paper from Jack's unresisting hand, and flung it on the fire.

Without a word, Jack rose and left the room. Ross waited till the sound of his footsteps had died away, and then sank into a chair and buried his face in his hands, a perfect storm of despair, agony, and remorse sweeping over him.

It did not last long. Rousing himself, he locked the door and settled down for an hour's work. His mother was at the Cedars, and no one else was likely to disturb him.

For some time he could not fix his attention. Instead of the words on the page before him, his brain kept repeating others, which he hated.

'That this exhibition be bestowed only upon such as can boast an irreproachable life and stainless character. That it be not bestowed upon any person known as a liar, a gambler, a scandal-monger, a drunkard, or otherwise unworthy the esteem of good men.'

Plain, straightforward, old-fashioned words. No disguising the truth there. He found himself following each term, and picturing all it meant.

'Liar!' He heard himself denying repeatedly that he had been drinking. He heard pleas of headache, excuses for late hours and heavy eyes, denial of friendship, perversion of facts.

'Gambler!' He saw a couple of boys playing as if dear life depended upon the cards in their trembling hands. He heard the exultant laugh of the winner, the muttered oath of the defeated. Alas! their faces were only too familiar.

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'Drunkard!' The very word was full of horror. He saw the sparkling glass, filled to the brim with liquid temptation. He saw a reeling figure in the lamplight stagger across the threshold and up the broad staircase. He saw it again, locked in the quiet room, drinking till all consciousness had flown. Only intoxicated! True, but a drunkard in all its hideousness and wretchedness.

How he hated and loathed the word. But it clung to him. He threw aside his books and took a novel from the shelf. It too failed. In desperation he rose and paced up and down the room, trying to divert his thoughts by building castles in the air concerning his future life. College and all its attractions and fascinations; position, honour, wealth!—all that he coveted for himself in the years to come. He grew flushed and excited as he pursued the ever-dear theme.

And then came the thought, 'The Rutland is the stepping-stone to all these!' and he shuddered at the possibility of losing it.

'I will not,' he murmured, wiping the perspiration from his hot forehead. 'It shall be mine! Life will be worthless without it.'

Stimulated to fresh exertion, he went back to his work, and by dint of constant effort got through a certain amount, not without help.

The eventful day drew near, and the boys of Eastdale Grammar School looked forward to it with varied feelings,—some of them, sure of a prize, with satisfaction and excited delight; some, conscious of failure, with vexation, annoyance, and in some cases jealous anger.

Jack had worked hard for two prizes in his form, and felt sure of getting them. He was not a genius by any manner of means, but he was clever and persevering, and took a good position in the school. The prospect of his own success, however, gave little pleasure. He was too full of anxiety about Ross.

It was a constant source of wonderment to both him and Aleck that Ross took it all with such apparent coolness; that is to say, took all the risk and uncertainty respecting his own precarious position. Full of eager excitement as to the Rutland, he never seemed to give one thought to the more

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important question of the loss of his moral standing and character. True, they could not tell what went on below the surface; they judged, as most do, from outward appearances.

Every day Jack went to school expecting to hear of further outbreaks on Ross's part, but the whole subject seemed to have died away. Either Ross was refraining from drink, or he was marvellously cautious and careful. No whisper or hint of suspicion was circulated in the school. Several times reference had been made of late to the rumour spread by the Dangerfields; but to Jack's surprise, and somewhat to his wrath and indignation, there was a very evident inclination to credit him with the escapade. Why they should be so ready to believe him capable of such conduct he could not imagine. He had never given them cause to entertain such an opinion of him.

He bore it all by no means with a martyr's spirit. Very cross and irritable was poor Jack in those days, and inclined to quarrel with every one. Nothing but his deep and true love for Ross, and his intense eagerness for him to win the Rutland, could have made him silent under so much provocation to speech. At times the temptation to vindicate himself was almost too strong to be resisted; but the recollection of all involved—of the Rutland, with its long train of consequences—came to his help, and sealed his lips.

The Christmas distribution of prizes was not a public one. Admission was not denied the parents and friends of the boys, but their presence was not requested, and it was an understood thing that only the boys were expected to attend.

Aleck, as an 'old boy,' went of course, and most of the 'old boys' in Eastdale, some of them home for the Christmas holidays from far-away parts of the world. The Doctor liked to see their faces again.

Aubrey was in high spirits. For a wonder, he expected a prize—his first! Being such an event in his life, he naturally made the most of it.

'It's like being married,' he said pathetically. 'It is only likely to happen once in a lifetime, so let us make as much of it as possible. I assure you, Jack, I feel uncommonly nervous and all-overish. Do I look pale?'

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His ruddy face was anything but pale, consequently he failed to excite interest or compassion by the pallor of his looks. Jack could not help laughing, but he wound up with a groan.

'I shall be glad when the whole affair is over. I hate examinations and prizes!'

'You want some medicine,' said Aubrey, patting him affectionately on the back. 'You look blue. What is the matter? Do you want my prize, you greedy dog-in-the-manger?—my one little ewe lamb, my Naboth's vineyard, you avaricious Jew.'

'Not I! I would rather have nothing to do with anybody's vineyard. Shut up, Aubrey, do; the Doctor is looking our way.'

The buzz and hum of excitement died into silence as the Doctor took his accustomed place. Several of the examiners and trustees of the Rutland exhibition were with him, and on them was concentrated the interest and attention of the school. The Doctor made the customary speech, but not in his usual manner. There was an air of gravity and disturbance, which was marked by all the boys, and set them wondering.

'What is in the wind now?' whispered Aubrey, in mock alarm. 'I begin to tremble! Oh, my beloved prize! Is the fond delusion over? Am I, after all, to be prizeless, even as I am priceless? Ye Fates, forefend!'

Jack made no reply; he was too absorbed to heed Aubrey's nonsense. He had caught sight of Parker's face, and its expression had riveted his attention. Such a mixture of malice and vindictive triumph he had never seen on any face before. It fascinated him, and at the same time filled him with vague alarm.

The distribution of prizes recalled his wandering thoughts, and, as his name was called out, he walked up to receive his hardly-won honours. To his surprise, instead of two he took four prizes, and his anxiety for Ross could not take all the gratification and pleasure out of them.

As he went back to his seat the last time, amid the cheers of the boys, he met Parker's eyes fixed on him with undisguised triumph. He returned it with a look of quiet indifference, and took his seat; but it troubled and perplexed him.

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Ross came in for a large share of honours, and took them with the utmost unconcern. They were as so many drops beside the sea of the Rutland.

Dr. Winslow looked at him with pain, and his words were very few and low. Others noticed it; Ross did not.

At last the prizes were all given, and now was to come the great event of the day,—the adjudgment of the Rutland. Richard and Forbes changed colour, and looked slightly nervous. They had no expectation of winning it, but until the whole affair was finally settled they could not avoid some degree of uncertainty. Ross was perfectly still and white; no one could have guessed the tumult and storm underlying that calm exterior. Those nearest noticed that the long slender fingers closed so firmly round a drawing pencil that the knuckles seemed as if they would break through the stretched skin.

Dr. Winslow stood for a minute in silence, looking round upon the sea of eager, expectant faces. His keen eyes did not fail to note the various expressions, and as they rested on one face they grew dark and severe. Jack saw the change, and knew that Parker's face had caused it.

'Circumstances have arisen,' said the Doctor at length, 'which make it necessary to postpone the adjudgment of the Rutland till to-morrow. At the usual time to-morrow the school will meet, and the decision of the examiners will then be made public.'

The words fell upon the astonished boys like an electric shock. No one stirred, but all sat gazing at the Doctor, as if expecting some explanation. But none came. He took his seat in silence, and a few minutes later the proceedings came to a close.

In the playground the boys crowded round the Rutland competitors, plying them with eager questions. What did it mean? Was there any row? The Doctor looked black enough over it. One imaginative youngster suggested that the Rutland Fund was exhausted, or that one of the trustees had fraudulently absconded, taking the trust fund with him.

Declining all conversation or speculation on the subject, Ross went home. Almost wild with agitation and anxiety, he could not bear the idle guesses and absurd surmises.

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Mona was at her window, but he would not look. Maggie met him at the gate, and sprang toward him with impetuous haste. He pushed her roughly aside and went in.

His mother came quickly out of the dining-room and kissed him.

'My darling boy!'

'Hush, mother!' he cried, in the sharpness of his pain and disappointment; 'the examiners have not finished yet. We are to meet again to-morrow.'

There was more than mere disappointment in his voice, but his mother did not hear it. She thought he was unstrung and nervous, and made irritable by the delay.

Accustomed to his moods, she left him to himself, and he went to his own room. In a few minutes Aleck and Jack returned, and soon the dinner-bell rang. He could not go down. It seemed to him that to sit at the table and hear the ordinary talk, or worse, the discussion about the Rutland, would drive him mad.

Jack ran up to ask him if he were going down, or would like to have his dinner sent to him. He replied that he did not want any dinner at all. His head ached, and he wished to be quiet. He was left alone all the afternoon,—alone with his wretched thoughts. A heavy presentiment of some evil weighed upon him, and he could not rise above it or shake it off.

At tea-time a note was brought from Dr. Winslow, requesting Ross's presence at his private residence that evening.

'It is something about the Rutland, of course,' said Mrs. Norman. 'Come straight home to-night, will you not, dear? I shall be so anxious to hear all about it.'

He kissed her, and wished her good-bye. Maggie danced to the door after him.

'Mind, you have promised me a treat if you get the Rutland.'

'I am not likely to forget it,' he said. 'You take good care of my memory.'

She looked very pretty, standing under the gaslight, with her crimson ribbons setting off her little dark face. With a sudden and unusual touch of tenderness, he stooped and kissed her.

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'Suppose I do not get the Rutland, Maggie?'

'Oh, but you will. Everybody says so.'

Then her quick brain saw a connection between the Doctor's note and his words, and she looked up, panic-stricken.

'Is that what the Doctor wants you for, Ross? He isn't going to take it from you, and give it to Richard, is he? I'll never speak to Richard again, if he takes it!'

'Don't be so silly, Maggie. Go in, and hold your tongue!'

He banged the door roughly, as if he would shut out the recollection of her words. But they haunted him all the way, coinciding only too faithfully with his own presentiment of evil.

He was shown into the Doctor's private room, and sat down, with throbbing heart. For some time he was left alone, and the silence, broken only by the monotonous ticking of the clock, excited him till he could not sit still. He was pacing the floor, counting the patterns on the carpet, when the door opened, and the Doctor entered.

He shook hands, and, expressing regret for the unavoidable delay, took his seat. Ross noticed that he did not take the easy chair standing so invitingly by the side of the fire; he took the heavy, business-like arm-chair at the head of the table.

It is curious to notice how the mind stoops from momentous things to notice trifles.

The Doctor held in his hand a folded paper, which he placed on the table before him. Ross watched every movement with a species of fascination.

'Were you surprised at the announcement respecting the Rutland this morning, Ross?'

The quiet, half sad tone in which the words were uttered startled Ross far more than the words themselves.

'Yes—I was surprised,' he stammered.

'Were you quite unable to account for it?'

'I could not account for it, sir.'

Taking a copy of the conditions from the mantelpiece, the Doctor passed it to him.

'Read it, Ross.'

He ran his eye down the paper; but the words ran one into the other, and he could see nothing but 'Drunkard,

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Gambler, Liar,' standing out with fearful distinctness. He laid the paper back on the table, but did not speak. Even then he retained sufficient presence of mind to refrain from criminating himself by incautious words.

'Does nothing there recall to your mind a very sufficient reason for a change in the award of the Rutland?' said the Doctor, watching his pale face with searching eyes.

There was silence. Ross leaned forward, resting his elbow on the table, and steadying his head on his hand. Speak he could not!—his lips were sealed.

'Ross, how deeply painful this interview is to me I cannot tell you. What it must be to you I cannot even guess! I cannot force your confidence; I would not if I could; but I do ask you now, at this crisis of your life, to trust me as you would your own father. I am not only your master, I am your friend; and, my poor boy, if ever you needed a friend you do now. I know much, but what I know comes from no friend of yours. Will you tell me all yourself, and let me hear the truth from your own lips? I have no wish to hear it from others.'

Still Ross was silent. Thought after thought chased each other through his heated brain. Should he deny it all and add to the long list of lies already heavy on his conscience? No, no! He cried out against it! He was low enough, God knew! He had fallen far enough already! He could not sink still lower!

Then brave it out! Assert your right to drink and gamble as it pleases you! Proclaim your freedom, your independence, and claim your liberty! He seized the dark suggestion, then flung it from him in despair! What! cast aside the shame and horror, and glory in his deep disgrace? No—a thousand times, no! Better dash out into the darkness and find an eternal hiding-place!

'Ross, my poor boy!'

The words seemed to come from the far distance, and then a heavy hand seemed to press upon his eyes and shut out the light; and darkness and insensibility gathered round him. He fought against it in desperation, throwing up his hands wildly; but the darkness deepened, and he dropped his head upon the table.

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The light came back at last. He found himself on the couch, with soft pillows under his head. The Doctor sat by his side, watching him with grave and kindly eyes.

'Do not speak,' he said; 'lie still and think. Remember that false steps can be retraced,—that one failure does not involve total defeat. Your life is yet in your own hands, my boy; you can make it what you will, with God's help.'

Wise and gentle words! They fell like balm upon the boy's crushed heart, and hope's life-giving touch aroused and nerved him.

Long he lay in the softened light, watching the flickering flames, and pondering the great mystery of life. Was there nothing more for him to find out? Had he lived, and learned, and fallen beyond all rising? Shame and dishonour bordered his horizon all around, except in the impenetrable future! A veil hung there, and his eager hands would fain have torn it down! Were the darkness and gloom and despair reaching far away into the years to come?

He rose up, and stretched out his hands.

'Is it not lost—my life? Are not the hope and gladness and beauty gone for ever? I cannot bear it! It will kill me! O God! let me die!'

He threw himself down upon the couch, burying his face among the pillows. The Doctor laid his hand upon his head.

'Not gone for ever, thank God. There are hope and gladness and beauty in the life before you. Ross, it is better to make a mistake in the beginning of life, and find it out, as you have done, than keep it to the end. If you were my own son I would choose for you *this*, black and terrible as it is, rather than an unchecked career with its far more black and terrible probabilities. Have you forgotten Mr. Harborough?'

Ross shivered at the name.

'His boyhood was as full of promise as yours. I knew him well, and often envied him; he was the cleverest of us all. Great things were prophesied for his future; how the prophecy was fulfilled you know.'

'But must it all be known?' cried the boy, thinking only of his own future. 'Am I to be branded for ever? Dr. Winslow, if I lose the Rutland, I lose all.'

'No; not all.'

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'Yes; I tell you, *all*. My life will not be worth keeping. Must I lose it?'

He sat up and waited for the reply, his eyes full of suspense and agony. The Doctor's face grew pitying.

'It does not rest with my *will*, Ross. I have nothing to do with it.'

'Then who has?'

'The examiners and trustees.'

'But do they know?' said the boy, with feverish lips.

The Doctor turned to the table and took up the paper which he had brought in with him.

'Have you an enemy, Ross?—one likely to do you a great wrong?'

'I have enemies; but not one who would do me any real injury—that I am aware of.'

'The examiners have each received a copy of this communication. Read it, Ross.'

He took the paper and turned to the light. The writing was small and cramped—evidently disguised, but it looked familiar.

'The Rutland Exhibition is about to be bestowed upon one who has no right to take it. The conditions exclude all who drink to excess or gamble. Ross Norman does both.'

Then followed the extract from the conditions already quoted. Ross read every word. But he was not prepared for what followed—a list of times and places where he had been intoxicated or partially so, and the names of those who had witnessed him in that state. His brain reeled as he read. The account was strictly accurate, even to the various hours stated.

It extended back to the party at Longman's, when Parker had accused him of being drunk. The witnesses were numerous there. The events of the night when Tom and Frank had escorted him home were faithfully recorded, even to the carrying him in and laying him on the couch. His brothers and Tom and Frank figured as witnesses there.

Then came one or two scenes which he had thought known only by himself and one other; yet in each case another name appeared as witness. He was completely staggered.

Next came the night which had given the school something

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to talk about, when Dangerfield's servant had seen him reel home in the moonlight.

He had expected that to be recorded, but not the next. Three or four evenings of dissipation, of drinking and gambling with Parker. In each case Parker's man-servant was the witness.

Ross gasped for breath.

'Well,' said the Doctor, 'is it true, Ross?'

'It is true.'

The Doctor's face cleared a little. 'Let us talk it over. There are several things I do not understand, and several things I mean to find out. But first, Ross, have you any idea who is the author of this?'

'There is only one who could do it—only one who knew! And yet he'—

'Has pretended to be your friend?'

'Do you know, then?' said Ross eagerly. 'Is it Parker?'

'I cannot say yet—I have learned much to-day. I received that paper early this morning, and each of the examiners received a similar one. It was too late to investigate it before school-time, and I did not choose to do what the writer evidently hoped and intended—namely, charge you with all this before the assembled school, without warning or notice. I was therefore forced to adjourn the award of the Rutland till to-morrow.'

'And I have lost it by my cursed folly!' groaned Ross. 'Gone!—the one cherished dream of my life!'

Scalding tears forced themselves from his hot eyes, and dropped upon the pillow. It was a crushing sorrow, a bitter disappointment, and not all his fortitude could enable him to bear it. All the past year had been brought so vividly before him by that long list! Each scene had risen with startling distinctness before his tortured eyes, and in the reeling, staggering figure he could have shrieked with agony and shame to recognise himself. It was so different, viewed in the calm light of reason and memory, from what it had appeared in the mad excitement of the hour! It had been pleasant to drink till life seemed a heyday of pleasure and forgetfulness—forgetfulness of all troubles, anxiety, and care. Pleasant to feel the glow and warmth, the blood flowing so

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freely, the exhilaration produced by what had so surely led him on to this great and bitter loss! In his anguish he hated it,—the treacherous drink which had worked his ruin! And yet he knew that, could he have seized a glassful that moment, the temptation to drink it would be too strong to be resisted.

As he sat brooding over the past, the present, and the future, he saw, as he had never seen before, the power which the spirit of drink had over him, and he recoiled in horror and disgust from the sight.

'Is the loss of the Rutland the chief thing to be regretted, Ross?'

The quiet words struck home.

He could not answer; for, as yet, the Rutland was to him the chief loss. All his hopes had been concentrated upon it; and though the shame of the exposure was crushing him, the downfall of his most cherished schemes was harder to bear. But he was in good and wise hands.

The Doctor read his thoughts, and his next words were on a higher theme than that of mere worldly ambition. He pictured life with its highest, noblest aim, and spoke of honour and truth and uprightness. On the one hand he placed the degraded drunkard—lost to every sense of true manliness, and dragging with him into his ruin and dishonour those whose lives should have been dearer than his own. On the other hand, he placed the type of Christian chivalry and honour—a life unstained, untouched.

His words were graphic, and strong in their absolute truth. There was no gainsaying them. The wretched boy listened with a despairing heart.

There had been a time when he had been full of aspirations after the true and beautiful—when his aim had been the perfection of Christian manliness—his ideal the spotless, unstained Christ. But, alas! his dreams had changed. Never before had he realized the change in his own life and nature. It was, indeed, a revelation.

It was well for him that the hand which drew the veil and showed him the fatal habit of drink in all its true colours was merciful as just. Not one unnecessarily hard word passed the Doctor's lips. He knew the boy's sensitive, highly-strung nature, and knew, too, that what would pass almost unheeded

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over coarser natures was agony unspeakable to him. He had truest sympathy with the boy's terrible temptations and struggles, for Ross *had* struggles, and though he did not spare the drunkard or the drink, he was merciful and gentle with him.

'What am I to do?' said Ross at last, lifting his haggard, tear-stained face. 'Must I come to school to-morrow?'

'No. That is not necessary. You may spare yourself that.'

'I cannot stay in Eastdale. I must go. I cannot face them!'

'Yes,' said the Doctor, after a pause. 'I think it will be well for you to go. But where can you go?'

'I will go to sea. There is nowhere else.'

'Do nothing rash, Ross. Would you like me to come and tell your mother? It will come better from me; and perhaps I may be able to advise her and you concerning your future. I shall not lose sight of you, my dear boy, and I hope yet to be proud of you. The boy's failure does not necessitate the man's.'

'Then you do not cast me off, and scorn me? You do not look upon me as all bad, depraved, and lost—utterly lost?' cried the boy, with desperate earnestness. 'Is it possible for me ever to regain the place I have forfeited?'

Even the Rutland was beginning to stand second now. No noble boy can bear the loss of good men's esteem—and Ross was noble, though erring. To feel that he had forfeited, perhaps for ever, the respect of the true-hearted head master was more than he could bear, and a storm swept over him!—a storm of remorse and anguish and *fear*. Had he lost his place for ever among the good men of earth?

'More than possible!' came the reassuring answer, and he caught back the choking sobs to listen. '*I expect you to do it.* But not alone, Ross. You do not yourself know yet the strife that is before you; it will be harder and fiercer and longer than you think. Your heart will fail you, doubtless; temptation will come, and, it may be, failure. I do not think it will; but it may. Can you nerve yourself up for the struggle against inclination and habit?'

He looked up, with a sudden light of resolution shining in his eyes.

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'I will try!'

Simple words, but fraught with deepest meaning. In that moment he passed a crisis in his life.

He knew well what he was doing. It was no blind, unreasoning impulse; but the result of strong conviction. He saw the whole truth, and recognised its vital importance.

He stretched out his hand, and the Doctor took it, and by his firm grasp inspired him with confidence and courage. He needed them sorely.

'God help you, my boy,' he said gravely. 'Your feet have wandered awhile, but it is not too late to retrace the mistaken steps. Be thankful that you have the will to do it. But it will be no easy matter; habit is strong. Are you prepared for the first decisive act?'

'What is it, sir?' was the half-frightened reply.

'Can you withstand temptation, Ross?'

He could not answer.

'Then, seeing your weakness, will it not be wisdom to withdraw from temptation?'

'Must I give it up altogether? If I control myself, will not that do?'

'But can you control yourself? And even if you could, why should you subject yourself to unnecessary torture? Will it not be harder day by day to force yourself to stop at a certain boundary? You have tried to do it already—with what result? If you bind yourself to keep within certain limits, you will condemn yourself to constant self-denial and restraint; for remember that as long as you indulge your taste for drink at all, the craving for it will increase. Your life will be one long strife, and can you trust yourself to fight and conquer under such conditions? It is a worse than dangerous experiment, my boy! I tell you frankly, that for you there is safety only in total abstinence. Bind yourself not to touch what has already worked for you such loss and sorrow, and in time it will cease to have any power to tempt you. Is not this true?'

'Yes; it is true!' Ross murmured.

'Do not think that your whole life will be a struggle; it will not. The time will come, I trust, when you will be freed from the power of the tempter. *But not if you play with him.*'

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'I will renounce it!' cried Ross, with sudden decision. 'And my mother! Will you tell her, sir?' he faltered, as soon as he could command his voice again to speak. 'I cannot tell her.'

The Doctor glanced at the clock. It was not late, and he rose from his seat.

'I will go home with you and see her. It will be best so. But, Ross, I want to ask you one question, has Jack known of all this? I see his name on that paper.'

'He has known a long time; he was the first to know.'

'Do you know that he has been under a cloud this last twelvemonth?'

'Yes, I knew it. Everybody could see it, sir.'

'But did you know why?'

'Not lately; he would not tell me. At first it was about his visit to Hickory's.'

'No such thing; he thought so, I know. Shall I tell you the truth, Ross? I heard that young Norman was at one of the gatherings last summer with Parker and others, and that he gambled and drank and quarrelled there. I heard again, later on, of other similar scenes. This summer I was told of worse than they; and not long ago I heard of unseemly songs, and of a reeling home at night. Shall I tell you what I did? I accused Jack of it all.'

Ross looked up bewildered.

'Accused Jack! I do not understand. He knew it was I.'

'But he did not tell me. He kept your secret, and all the blame, Ross. He is a noble brother. Few would have done so much.'

'But why did you think it was Jack, sir?'

'Simply because I could not think it was any other Norman.'

'And he would not clear himself! That is like Jack.'

It was snowing fast, and they wrapped up before leaving the warm house. Grace came stealing into the hall.

'You are not going out, papa? Is that you, Ross? Why don't you come into the drawing-room?'

'Go back this moment, you naughty girl,' said her father, with mock displeasure. 'How dare you come out here into the cold?'

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'It is not cold. I will run in before you open the door,' she answered, clinging to him. 'It is a shame to go out this snowy night.'

Ross walked past her and opened the door. She looked at him astonished; it was so unlike Ross Norman. But the cold wind sent her back to the drawing-room, and the two went out.

Arrived at Northland, Ross showed the Doctor into the deserted dining-room, and rang the bell.

'Tell mamma that Dr. Winslow is here and wishes to see her,' he said to the servant.

She withdrew, her face full of surprise. Why had not Master Ross told his mamma himself?

Ross turned to the Doctor and held out his hand.

'Good-night, sir,' he said, his voice trembling with emotion. 'I shall never forget what you have done and said to-night.'

They shook hands, and he disappeared. The next minute Mrs. Norman came in.

Ross heard her gentle greeting as he paused on the stairs; then he went on and locked himself in his own room.

An hour later he heard the front door shut, and knew the Doctor had gone. He could not control his agitation or sit still. As he was pacing the floor in an agony of suspense and uncertainty, there came a quiet knock at the door—his mother's knock. He let her in, but locked the door again. He could see no one but her.

She did not speak, but put both her arms round him, and he dropped his head upon her shoulder with a smothered cry.

'Mother.'

She drew him down upon the couch, and he wept out his misery and disappointment in her arms.

'I have lost it all, mother!—the Rutland and my college life.'

'My poor boy.'

Her tears mingled with his, and he felt that her disappointment was as bitter and keen as his own.

'You know it all, mother?'

'Yes, my darling; all. Thank God it is no worse.'

'How could it be worse?' he cried. 'It could not be worse!'

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'Hush! It would be worse to follow in Mr. Harborough's footsteps.'

'I will go to sea, mother. I will not stay here. I have been trouble enough.'

'Not to sea, my poor boy. You shall go away,—Dr. Winslow thinks it best,—but you must not go to sea. He (Dr. Winslow) wishes you to go to his brother at Vesey for a year. I think it is a good plan, though I cannot bear to let you go.'

'I cannot stay here. It would kill me,' he cried. 'I must go away—the farther the better. I will go to Vesey.'

He did not say much of the remorse and grief which made Eastdale unbearable, but she knew it all.

He was so reserved, naturally so reticent and self-contained, that she did not expect words from him.

'Do they know—Aleck and Jack?' he asked, after a long pause, during which she had been smoothing his hair caressingly, as she had been wont to do in his old childish days.

'Not yet. I came straight up to you.'

'Then go and tell them,' he said, rousing himself. 'I will go to bed. Don't let them come up, mother; I can't see them.'

'No; they shall not,' she said, anxious only to spare him all she could. 'But do not lock your door. I must come in again and see you before I go to bed. I will not disturb you if you are asleep.'

Asleep! little chance of that, he thought, as he laid his aching head upon the pillow. He heard the boys go softly past his door on their way to bed; and then his mother came in again, and sat beside him, holding his hand.

It was easier to talk now that the gas was out, and only the firelight flickering on wall and ceiling, leaving the bed in shadow, and the clocks were striking two when at last his mother left him, and he fell into a heavy sleep.

There was great excitement among the Eastdale boys the next morning, as they gathered in the schoolroom at the appointed time. A rumour was afloat that Ross Norman had forfeited the Rutland, but how it arose no one seemed to know.

He was eagerly watched for, and a buzz of surprise and conjecture rose as time passed and still he did not come;

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neither did Jack make his appearance. Parker was there, his face full of gratified malice.

It had been the custom for years to read aloud the conditions of the Rutland before its award. The boys listened attentively as the Doctor read clause after clause, laying no particular stress on any. A breathless silence reigned as he laid down the paper and took up the examiners' list.

'The first name on the list is Ross Norman's. I am sorry to say he has forfeited the Rutland by a violation of the conditions. The examiners therefore award the exhibition to Richard Crawford, whose name stands second.'

Richard started to his feet, his face red and white by turns.

'I would rather not have it, sir—indeed I would!' he cried, surprised into sudden speech. 'I cannot take it from Norman.'

He recollected himself then, and sat down in confusion. The school, which had received the announcement in silence, so complete had been its astonishment, now burst into cheers, none the less hearty for Richard's generous outburst.

The Doctor smiled as he signed Crawford to approach, but his heart ached for the poor boy whose long-coveted triumph was thus given to another.

There was little formality in the proceedings. The examiners shook hands cordially with the successful candidate, and the Doctor congratulated him, and told him to spend his college days as he had spent his school days. He was proud and fond of Dick, though Ross stood first in his regard.

The boys were perhaps better pleased that Crawford should take the exhibition than Ross, who was too exclusive and reserved to be a general favourite. Parker's cheers rang high, and had a tone of triumph which was noticed by more than one.

As soon as Richard had taken his place, and the cheering had subsided, the Doctor again rose and signed for silence.

'There remains now a most painful duty for me to perform,' he said, his face gathering a severity and sternness rarely seen there. 'It is not often that a case of unmitigated hypocrisy, deception, meanness, and treachery, comes before the master of such a school as this. I had hoped better things of all my

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boys. One among you has been guilty of sin and treachery so black and heinous as to exclude him from the society of all true manly boys, and rob him of the respect of all who value honour and virtue. I speak of Lewis Parker.'

A thrill of excitement and wonder ran through the school. Every eye was turned on Parker, who, after a futile attempt to brave it out, sat pale and cowed, trembling in every limb.

'Some of you may know that more than once I have been forced to reprimand Lewis Parker sternly for the sin of intoxication,' went on the Doctor. 'It is no secret to you that for a year or two he has been pursuing a course which could but bring him to disgrace and ignominy. From time to time tidings have reached me of disgraceful orgies and scenes of dissipation only fit for minds the lowest and most depraved; and from time to time I have warned, admonished, and rebuked in vain. Not content with his own ruin, he drew a careful plan by which to work the ruin of another; one whom he hated, and in whose downfall he took a fiendish delight. By professions of friendship he won his confidence, and led him on, step by step, till he was sufficiently involved to serve his purpose. He then, in a disguised hand, wrote down every instance of *his friend's* unhappy failure, and sent the list to me. Can you imagine a deeper treachery than that?'

A murmur of indignation rose among the boys, and those on either side of Parker drew back as if they scorned the contact. In vain he looked round for one friendly face. He met nothing but contempt and condemnation.

'He sent that list at a momentous time; he had well calculated its effect, but he made one mistake. In working only too successfully the downfall of another, he forgot that he himself was doubly implicated. Drinker, gambler, and now traitor he stands before the world. Lewis Parker, is not this true?'

The wretched boy struggled hard to call up some remnant of bravado and defiance, and stammered out a reckless denial of it all.

'It is all a lie. I know nothing about it. What is Ross Norman to me?'

'Who said anything about Ross Norman?' demanded the Doctor.

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The boys began to hiss, and Parker grew desperate and furious.

'Why don't you have him up before the school and disgrace him publicly? He is your favourite, and you spare him. He is as bad as I am, and drinks and gambles too. What right have you to screen him? But I will take care the world shall know.'

'Silence this moment,' said the Doctor sternly. 'Are you lost to all sense of shame? Is there not one remnant of true manliness and nobility left? Are you dead to every pure and honourable feeling—every good impulse? You have indeed fallen low.'

'No lower than he,' gasped the unhappy boy passionately. 'I will be revenged on him for this. He shall suffer.'

It was useless for the Doctor to order silence. Parker had lost all control over himself, and wild, wicked words poured from his white lips. Oaths and curses and fierce threats of vengeance followed each other in rapid succession, till the horror-struck boys dragged him down upon his seat.

As soon as he could make his voice heard, the Doctor formally pronounced the sentence of expulsion, and, followed by the contempt of nearly all his schoolfellows, the boy left the school for ever.

There was a murmur amongst those nearest him.

'What is that? Speak out,' said the Doctor.

'He has been drinking, sir.'

'I thought as much.'

The expressions on the various faces differed considerably. Some expressed an indignant contempt; some a horrified surprise; some—not many—indifference or astonishment only.

The Doctor glanced round; he had in his hand a paper which had hitherto been lying on the desk before him.

The boys sat in silent expectation, waiting for the next scene in this strange morning's programme.

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CHAPTER X.

THE EASTDALE GRAMMAR SCHOOL TOTAL ABSTINENCE SOCIETY.

'THIS paper was put into my hands this morning,' Dr. Winslow said. 'I did not intend to refer to it yet—not, perhaps, till next half; but circumstances make this such a fitting occasion that I cannot hesitate. For some time past there has been a growing conviction on the part of some in the school that the use of intoxicating drinks as a mere beverage is, as a practice, injurious and harmful. This is a subject which, as you probably know, is engrossing the attention of many good and wise men; and, as a result of their investigations, facts are placed before the world which will enable it to judge for itself whether strong drink or alcohol may be taken without risk or harm. Not one of you will be prepared to deny that, taken to excess, it works irreparable injury. Instances of its fatal influence are only too common, and not one day passes without some fearful deed of violence committed by a drink-mad man or woman. You need not go far to see the work of this great social curse. Our own town is full of it! There are homes within a stone's throw of your own which have been wrecked and devastated by the power of drink. Night after night the song of the drunkard is heard in the streets and public-houses; and, worse still, the cries of those who, though innocent, have to bear the sorrow and suffering! Not two weeks ago, a drunkard's child was found dead among the lime-kilns, killed by her own father's hand. Some of you knew him. Last night I saw a man strike his wife to the ground, making the

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blood flow from her cut head! Day by day, night by night, such scenes are being enacted all over this fair land of ours. Homes are broken up, the prospects of promising boys and clever girls ruined for life. Life is endangered,—nay, taken,—health destroyed, time and talents wasted, and all by that one potent spirit of strong drink.

'I have this subject very deeply at heart. Circumstances lately have forced it upon my consideration, and I have intended bringing it before you. But I did not think I should have such painful examples among those whom it is my most earnest wish and strong endeavour to lead into perfect honour and true nobility. For the first time Eastdale Grammar School has been degraded by the presence of a habitual drunkard. Hard words—but, alas! too true. You have seen this morning a specimen of the depth to which drink can sink its victim. But there are far deeper depths! Not long ago the town was startled by the sudden death of one of its best-known men. It was said that he died of apoplexy; but how caused? By strong drink! I knew him when he was a boy—a clever, talented boy, full of life and vigour and brilliant promise. He learned to drink, and what was first his slave became at last his bitterest foe and master. Coleridge says, "Evil habit first draws, then drags, then drives." That this is true you have sorrowful proof. No one knows who is likely to yield to the power of this strange tempter. The strongest, the most promising, sink into the abyss, and are lost! Strange that, knowing this, seeing it with their own eyes, and owning its truth, men continue to rush headlong to their ruin. Let me tell you something of what is going on around us. Out of every three hundred inmates of our workhouses, seventy-five per cent. are there through the influence of drink. It is drink that fills our prisons and asylums; it is drink that causes an enormous percentage of all the sin that is committed in England. Not a city, town, village, or hamlet is free from this fearful worker of shame and death. Millions have lost their all—health, home, and heaven, through its agency; and it is existing, flourishing! I will go across the seas, and tell you what it is doing in a foreign land. In the United States it has been diligently at work, and within the last ten years has destroyed

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three hundred thousand lives; has sent one hundred thousand children to the workhouses; has made one thousand persons insane; has sent one hundred and fifty thousand people into prisons and workhouses; has caused two thousand suicides; has made two hundred thousand widows, and one million orphans!

'You cannot take those numbers in!—it is impossible to realize all that the mere figures represent. I could tell you much more, but this is scarcely the time. Some future day I will endeavour to show you how and why this great factor is so injurious. The subject, in its physiological aspect, ought to be studied by every intelligent human being. That it is injurious when taken to excess every one admits; difference of opinion rests entirely on the question of quantity. What is injurious for one may not harm another.

'You have seen for yourselves what it can do to lower and degrade. You know that the worst and most confirmed drunkards began their downward path *when they were boys.* You know that it robs its victims of purity and happiness, and sinks them into a fearful abyss of wretchedness and want and crime. Recognising all this, it will be well for you, boys as you are, to think the subject over, and resolve your own course of action in what is fast becoming a national warfare. None are too young to act their part. I have here a list of those among you who have thrown down the gauntlet to the evil genius of strong drink; who have voluntarily given up entirely the use of alcohol, and pledged themselves to total abstinence. At the top of the list there is a vacant space, which I now take the opportunity to fill up.'

Dipping his pen in the ink, the Doctor deliberately filled in the space, the boys looking on with breathless excitement.

'I will now read the list aloud, and if, at the close, any of you desire to add your names, I can only say that you will be following where your master believes it his duty to lead.

'Arthur Wilberforce Winslow, Head Master of Eastdale Grammar School.

Cecil Dalglish, } Assistant Masters.
Rohan Bruce, }
Richard Crawford.
Arthur Winslow.

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Edward Winslow.
Aleck Norman.
Ross Norman.
John Norman.
Derrick Forbes.
Edmund Lacey.
Frank Harley.
Henry Price.
George Druce.

'I now leave the subject with you for the present. Knowing what you know—seeing what you have seen—you cannot fail to recognise its importance. Consult your conscience and your common sense. Think!—decide!—act!'

Thoroughly taken by surprise, the boys sat in perfect silence for a few moments. Then a voice suddenly broke into a ringing cheer, which was immediately taken up by the whole school.

'Hip! hip! hurrah! Three cheers for Dr. Winslow and the Eastdale Grammar School Total Abstinence Society!'

The Doctor smiled, but a slight tremor of the sensitive under lip showed how the events of the morning had touched him.

There was a stir and movement among the boys, and Aubrey elbowed his way up to the desk, his eyes betraying a deeper feeling than he cared to own. It was his voice which had led the cheer.

'Let me sign my name, if you please, sir!' he cried, making a snatch at the pen; 'I'm not going to be left out in the cold.'

'Stop, Aubrey. I would rather have you think about it. The decision of impulse is often regretted.'

'Regretted! Oh, I shall regret it, sir, often enough! I know that. I don't want to think about it any more, though! I have thought enough! I would rather sign before the Christmas parties than after.'

The Doctor could not help smiling. 'Be it as you wish, Aubrey. But beware of withdrawing your hand from the plough, my boy. Are you going to join our company, Longman?'

'I have only wanted a leader, sir!' was the frank reply. 'I have been thinking of it a long time, but I did not know what the other fellows were going to do; they have kept it quiet enough!'

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He looked reproachfully at Arthur, who answered quickly,—

'We never thought you would join, Longman.'

Tom coloured. 'You might have tried me.'

He signed his name with a steady deliberation which told of a deep resolve.

Several others followed his example, and then the Doctor dismissed the school.

There was excitement enough that day in many an Eastdale home. Some of the parents condemned, some approved. One unfortunate boy was summarily despatched to withdraw his name from the list at once. Nevertheless the little company grew larger day by day. The influence of those who had joined was strong for good, and, as is always the case, example went further than precept. The future of many an Eastdale boy was influenced by the action taken during his school days.

Ross remained almost entirely in his own room till the day arrived for his departure from home. He saw no one but his mother and Dr. Winslow and Jack. His disappointment grew keener as time passed, as he realized all that he had lost —the Rutland, with all that would have followed in its train.

It was no easy thing, either, to keep the vow of total abstinence, which he made amid bitter tears of agony and remorse. He longed for the forgetfulness which he had formerly been able to call to his aid, and often chafed against his self-imposed restraint.

But the kind, wise forethought of his master made his task easier than his fears.

Surrounded by the beauties and novelties of a foreign land, his mind gradually recovered tone, and by degrees the fearful craving for the accustomed stimulants ceased to torture him. But it was the work of time.

The blow fell heavily on Mrs. Norman; but they hid the worst from her. She never knew all.

The story of the candlesticks Ross told her himself, and she redeemed them, and cherished them more than ever for her poor boy's sake. He had nothing but pity and love from her — no angry or even sorrowful condemnation. He had that from others! In after years he said that only his mother's faith in him, and the Doctor's trust and merciful

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kindness, kept him from utter despair. Well for him he did not fall among the Pharisees.

Jack returned to school with a lightened heart, and once more found himself out of the shadow.

A few words of appreciation and approval from the Doctor told him that all was explained.

'Seeing that I have made so many mistakes,' said the Doctor, looking at him with kindly eyes, 'it is just possible that I am wrong in another matter. Were you the author of the picnic witticism, Jack?'

'I! No, indeed, sir!' cried Jack, in amused surprise. 'I thought everybody knew who did that! There was only one boy who could sketch well enough!'

'Oh, indeed!' said the Doctor significantly; and Jack looked alarmed.

'Never mind, Jack; I am not going to rake up old grievances. Besides,' he added, with a quizzical glance, 'the author suffered by proxy, and it would not be fair to punish him as well.'

Jack laughed. 'No, sir; let the proxy have the satisfaction of knowing that his sufferings were not quite useless! It is a small satisfaction to know that I saved some one else from punishment.'

The Eastdale Grammar School Total Abstinence Society grew and flourished.

It had two branches—one for the boys, headed by Dr. Winslow; one for the girls, headed by Mona, Clarice, Grace, and Dora. There was a good-natured rivalry between the two, each striving to obtain the larger number of members. The boys carried off the palm ultimately.

And here we must leave them. A battle had been fought and won, and the victor had scars which he would probably carry to his grave. But the very scars which tell of warfare are often strongest barriers against a future fall. It was so with Ross. He had fought, and fallen, and risen again; but the stern conflict had redoubled his strength, and armed him for future warfare. Strong to withstand temptation, he passed unscathed through many a fiery trial, and came out

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